

BLAKE BLACK



BRITNIE  
HEART

MEMENTO VIVERE DUET  
BOOK ONE

## **BRITTLE HEART**

Memento Vivere Duet Book One

Blake Black

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There is content within this book that may set off triggers [click here](#) for details and help.

If you find an error or you would like to discuss something with me, please email:

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## BLURB

My life has never been perfect.

In fact, it's anything but.

When my parents passed away in a car accident, I had to take care of my little sister. I supported us both as I tried to finish college and work two jobs. It's hard to focus on my life when I have to keep myself together for someone else.

But just as I felt everything was falling apart, I landed my dream internship at the NYPD Crime Analysis Unit. Although I am guarded, my new boss is determined to befriend me, and so is her cop brother and his two best friends. As hard as it is to keep my walls around them up, they're starting to crumble.

With my new connections in place—searching deeper into the truth of my parents' accident—it causes unwanted attention from powerful people.

Though the truth may be harder to swallow.

What if the truth will change the course of everything I've ever known?

*From Blake Black comes the first book in the Memento Vivere Duet.*

*This is a reverse harem, hurt/comfort, slow burn, curvy, abused FMC, found family, sugary sweet, and must be read as a duet.*

*For all my fellow big-hearted girls with the hips to match, this  
one is for us.*

# GLOSSARY

How to pronounce [Carolina](#) in Italian

How to pronounce [Lina](#) in Italian

How to pronounce [Chiara](#) in Italian

*Piccola* – Little one (girl)

*Buon appetito* – Buon appetite

*Grazie* – Thank you

*Buongiorno* – Good morning / Good day

*Brava* – Good girl

*Carina* – Pretty one

*Dio* – God

*Taci* – Hush

*Porca miseria!* – Dammit!

*Stronzo* – Asshole

*Zio* - Uncle

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Please be aware that this book might have some triggering content due to a binge eating disorder. Any inaccuracies depicting this real eating disorder are meant to be under creative license to fit the story and not spread misinformation.

This book might have some triggering content due to abuse, body shaming, and bullying.

For a more detailed list of content warnings, please check my [website](#).

You can find a [Playlist](#) at the end of the book.



MEMENTO VIVERE

# CHAPTER ONE

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## **Carolina**

Exhausted, I slide down the exterior wall of my local 7-Eleven until I'm seated on the rough concrete. A long sigh escapes my lips as I stretch my legs. My feet hurt like hell.

A gravelly voice breaks the silence. "Long night?" Howie, the neighborhood homeless guy, asks, sitting beside me on the grimy sidewalk.

I lift my head, offering him a tired smile. "Seems like the jerks just keep getting jerkier," I grumble, my annoyance palpable.

Howie chuckles, a grin spreading across his weather-beaten face. He absently strokes his scruffy beard. "You're out a bit later than usual," he notes.

I pull my backpack onto my lap from beside me and dig around to get out the two cheeseburgers I bought, still hot from the convenience store's warmer. Handing one to Howie, I eagerly tear open the packaging of my own. The smell of the fast food brings a small moment of comfort at the end of a long day.

"Tonight's shift was a complete nightmare. Cindy, as usual, didn't lift a finger, leaving me to handle all the orders. Some jerk thought it was funny to trip me with his foot, sending a tray full of tequila shots flying. Not only did I have to deal with the mess, but Donny made me pay for it. I worked so hard tonight and went out with zero tips," I say before taking a big bite out of my burger.

Howie hesitates before opening his package. “You shouldn’t buy me food when you didn’t make money tonight, Lina,” he remarks, looking down at his burger.

“Dig in already, or it will get cold,” I say around a mouthful, looking down at my phone.

It’s just past three in the morning, and I’ll need to get up again in about three hours. Thankfully, the walk home isn’t too far.

Finally, Howie starts to eat his burger with shaking hands, and we sit in comfortable silence.

*I hope this is not the first thing he’s eaten today.*

That’s one of the reasons I like him so much. He has never once judged me for seeking comfort here after a rough day of work, using food to eat my feelings. He simply sits with me and lets me wallow in peace without commenting on my eating habits.

At least the burgers are only a dollar each, so I don’t have to feel too guilty about the money I spend every night. I already feel guilty enough for relying on food for solace.

I reach behind me and take out my hair tie to release my thick, straight, collarbone-length hair, loving how my slight headache lessens instantly.

As soon as I finish the burger, my emotions begin to settle. It always feels like a therapy session. I can’t afford to see an actual therapist, but if I could, they would likely agree that I need to see one because I rely on food for emotional support. I don’t have any friends besides Howie to vent to or discuss my feelings with. And I can’t burden my sister with these issues. She’s only sixteen, and I want her to grow up without facing the same struggles I did. I want her to have a carefree childhood without constantly worrying about money or any of our other problems.

The wind picks up, and I shudder. It’s early November, and the nights are getting cold here in New York.

“Did you already contact Gloria for a sleeping space this winter?” I ask Howie.

“Nah, I can manage a while longer. Many other people need it more.” He shrugs.

I don’t know how old Howie is. He always tells me he forgot, but I would guess he’s in his mid-sixties and definitely should not sleep out in the cold.

With a grunt, I push myself upright, dusting off the back of my jeans, and pick up my backpack, slinging it over my shoulder. “You got everything you need for tonight?” I ask, looking at the old man with concern.

“I’m good, kid. But thanks,” he assures me, his voice tinged with gratitude. Then he looks at me sternly. “Don’t like you walking home this late. It ain’t safe.”

“My ass is not so easy to kidnap, you know,” I joke, giving my butt a slap. Howie just huffs, glancing away to hide the hint of a smile on his face. “Have a good night,” I say, turning to leave.

“You too, kid,” he grumbles, adjusting the blanket around his shoulders.

As I walk away, I make a promise to myself to visit the shelter tomorrow. But for now, all I can think about is making it home and getting a few precious hours of sleep.



My phone alarm goes off, jerking me awake. It doesn’t feel like I’ve slept at all, but there’s no time to dwell on that. I need to get up and prepare breakfast for Chiara. She’s still sleeping peacefully in bed next to me, completely oblivious of the alarm or my return last night.

We live in a tiny, rundown apartment with just two bedrooms. Roberto, our uncle, has the other one. There’s only one bathroom, a kitchen, and a living room. It’s absurd that I have to share a bed with my sixteen-year-old sister at almost twenty-two, but it’s the reality we’re stuck with.

*At least I have a bed.*

Getting up, I pull some clothes out of my drawer. I don't have many to choose from. Most of my money goes toward rent, groceries, Roberto's drinking habit, and things for Chiara. Besides, everything I own and wear is black, so it's not noticeable if I wear the same shit repeatedly.

I make my way to the bathroom and quickly shower, brush my teeth and hair, and get dressed before applying some makeup. I look in the mirror, and the only things I truly like about myself are my black hair and gold-brown eyes, which I inherited from my mother. My sister, Chiara, and I resemble her a lot, with almond-shaped eyes that gently tilt upward.

Our mother was a beautiful Italian woman with sun-kissed skin and full lips. And while Chiara has her petite frame, I am even shorter than her and inherited my body shape from my father's side, which is a lot curvier.

Unfortunately, it's not the hourglass type of curvy with a flat stomach and a generous bust. I've had a belly, big thighs, and large arms for as long as I can remember. Being a size sixteen at only five feet two makes my body shape a circle.

If it weren't for the fact that I love my little sister with all my heart, I might feel jealous of her for inheriting all the good genes. But I've been taking care of her for the past five years, and she is all I have. I could never harbor any resentment toward her, especially not for something as shallow as this.

*Or so I tell myself.*

As I finish my mascara, I notice her standing in the doorway.

"Can I have my turn?" she asks.

"Sure, *piccola*," I say, reaching up to affectionately pat her head as I leave the bathroom and head into the kitchen to make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

Soon after, Chiara finishes in the bathroom and joins me in the kitchen to eat. I place a glass of orange juice and a plate in front of her.

*"Buon appetito,"* I say.

She smiles at me. “*Grazie, Lina.*”

She finishes her breakfast as the door to Roberto’s room opens.

*Fuck, he’s not usually awake at this time of day.*

He walks into the kitchen and immediately starts berating me. “Is there any food left for me, or did you eat everything again, pig?”

Trying to diffuse the situation, I grab two more slices of bread from the package. “I’ll make something for you too. You can go to sit in the living room, and I will bring it to you.”

As I begin spreading peanut butter on the bread, he grabs my wrist, causing me to look up at him. “I don’t want that cheap crap. Make me something better,” he demands, and I nearly puke from the sour smell coming out of his mouth.

I try to free my arm, but he’s a large man, and despite him being a raging alcoholic and in his fifties, I’m not strong enough to match him. His black hair is starting to gray on the sides and his dark eyes that were once a pretty shade of brown are now always rimmed red. The hand gripping my wrist has a black cross tattooed on it, already fading.

“We don’t have anything better here, Roberto. But these sandwiches are good, and I’m sure you’ll like them. Please, just sit down,” I plead.

In a fit of anger, he shoves me into the kitchen counter. “Don’t tell me what to do! Get me something better! Where is the money you owe me?” he barks out, his rage escalating.

I don’t owe him jack shit, as I’m the only one earning money and covering the rent and bills. But ever since he took us in five years ago after our parents passed away, he feels entitled to control and command me.

I never understood how my kind and loving father could have had a brother like him.

“Where is my money?” he shouts, pushing me again.

“I didn’t make any tips last night, but I’ll give you the money tomorrow after my shift,” I say, anticipating his next

move when he forcefully grabs me and throws me to the floor.

“Lina!” Chiara cries out, rising from her chair.

“Go to the bathroom and lock the door!” I tell her as Roberto kicks my stomach.

“Lina...” Chiara pleads once more, shaking from head to toe.

I raise my voice. “Now, Chiara!”

She obeys, closing the bathroom door just as Roberto delivers another kick. As soon as the click of the lock echoes, I curl my body into a ball, trying to shield my head with my hands.

“You worthless, fat piece of shit! I’m going to teach you what happens when you steal my money!” he spews, continuing to kick me until he’s out of breath.

I watch as he staggers into the living room, mumbling, then wince as I struggle to sit up from the floor, pain coursing through my body. My lip is busted and bleeding, and I know I’ll have bruises all over my torso again, but it seems like nothing is broken. *This time.*

He’s broken some of my ribs twice before. I don’t have insurance, so I’ve never been to the hospital to get them checked, but I felt it at the time.

Leaning against the kitchen counter, I take a shaky breath, my lungs aching. The bathroom door inches open, and Chiara’s wide, frightened eyes find mine. They share the same golden hue as our mother’s, and I see a flicker of her in them for a moment.

*How I wish she could be here right now.*

Thinking of my mother pulls a memory to the forefront, and my heart aches.

*The world blurs around me as I run, the wind rushing past my ears, the grass tickling my feet. I feel invincible, like a bird soaring through the sky. But suddenly, my foot catches on*

*something, and I'm tumbling forward. The ground rushes up to meet me, and I feel a sharp sting on my knees. I look down to see them scratched and bleeding.*

*"Topolina!" I hear Mama's voice, filled with concern. She's by my side in an instant, her hands gently examining my wounded knees. "Oh, my little mouse, are you okay?"*

*I bite my lip, trying hard to hold back the tears. I don't want to cry. I want to be brave. But the pain is real, and the tears threaten to spill.*

*Then, I hear the soft cooing of my baby sister and my father's familiar footsteps. He approaches, holding Chiara in his arms. Her big golden eyes look at me curiously, her tiny fingers reaching out.*

*"Here," Papa says, handing her to my mother. He then kneels in front of me, his eyes searching mine. "It's okay to cry, Lina. Pain is a part of life. But remember, it's never okay to give up. You're strong, and you can handle everything."*

*I nod, tears streaming down my face. My father smiles gently, and with a strength that always amazes me, he lifts me onto his shoulders. From up here, the world looks different—brighter—and the pain in my knees fades as we walk.*

With a gentle shake of my head, I push the memory away, knowing I need to be present, and my tears won't be helpful to anyone right now.

With a silent nod, I beckon Chiara, not wanting to risk capturing Roberto's attention. She hesitates just a second before coming over, her whole body trembling. She gently touches my arm as though to ensure she is not hurting me.

With her help, I get up, but I wobble, the pain piercing through. She steadies me but is still shaking herself.

Her voice is choked, almost a whisper against the lingering silence in the kitchen, and tears fill her eyes as she asks, "Are you okay?"

I muster a weak smile, more for her sake than mine. “Of course. Come on, we can’t have you late for school.”

She glances at my face, her brow furrowing with worry. “Your lip... It’s bleeding.”

“Let me wash this off,” I say, limping toward the bathroom.

She hovers nearby before I close the door behind me. Her presence is a bittersweet reminder that, in this chaos, at least we have each other. Even though I’d give a lot to have her out of here.

Taking deep breaths and fighting back tears, I wash away the blood from my lip. It’s tender, but the damage is not noticeable from afar.

“I’ll be fine. Just two more years.” I whisper to myself, taking in my reflection.

I snap the mask of indifference I show the world in place and prepare for another dreadfully long day.

## CHAPTER TWO

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### **Carolina**

Once I leave the subway, I navigate through the bustling streets of Manhattan, heading toward the John Jay College of Criminal Justice.

The college is a massive glass building and part of the City University of New York. It's my final year as an undergraduate student studying forensic science. I was lucky enough to receive a scholarship, thanks to my high GPA, our difficult financial situation, and some kind-hearted recommendation letters from my past teachers. Without it, I would have never been able to afford college and pursue my dream of becoming a forensic toxicologist.

This morning's ordeal with Roberto has made me late, making me rush into the building, determined to make it to my classroom on time. I hate drawing attention to myself by arriving late, but I hate the idea of missing a lecture because of that awful man even more.

My professor glances at me with a raised eyebrow but thankfully doesn't say anything as I quietly slip into the room and make my way toward the back. I quickly sit and get out my laptop, preparing to follow along with the class.

My classes start in the early morning. Since it's my final year, I only have three courses left—Advanced Forensic Toxicology, Forensic Chemistry, and Forensic Science. I genuinely enjoy all of them, but it can be challenging to fully engage and function at such a high level with so little sleep.

When my classes for the day are over after lunch, I head to the Upper West Side to start my afternoon waitressing shift at a bread and bagel café.

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“Thank you, dear.” Mr. Simmons gently touches my hand when I refill his coffee cup.

“Would you like another bagel?” I ask him with a smile.

I like the old man, and he comes here almost every day.

“My doctor wouldn’t approve,” he shares, his expression telling me he disagrees.

“If you don’t tell him, I won’t either.” I wink at him.

He chuckles. “Sure, dear. Please bring me another one.”

“Coming right up,” I reply before returning to the cash register, where my boss, Mrs. Miller, is waiting.

She looks at me sadly. “You’re great with the customers,” she says, and I feel a sense of unease in her tone.

“What’s wrong, Mrs. Miller?” I ask.

She nervously twists her hands. “The café hasn’t been making enough money lately.”

I brace myself, already sensing where this conversation is headed. I’ve truly enjoyed working here.

The pay is decent, the people are kind, and I genuinely like being here, unlike my job at the bar.

“So, you’re letting me go,” I state in a calm and neutral tone.

She nods, tears welling up in her eyes. “I’m truly sorry, Carolina, but you won’t need to come in tomorrow.”

I nod. “All right. Thank you. I appreciated the opportunity to work here.”

Mrs. Miller grabs my shoulders, pulling me into a hug. “We loved having you here too, honey. And if you ever need a

recommendation for another job, I'll make sure to speak highly of you.”

I normally don't get hugs. Usually, I'm the one giving them to Chiara, so I feel awkward.

I carefully extract myself from her embrace, grab a bagel and say, “We shouldn't keep Mr. Simmons waiting.”

Mrs. Miller nods, wiping away a tear.

*Damn, what am I going to do now?*

## CHAPTER THREE

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### **Carolina**

After getting my paycheck, saying goodbye to Mr. and Mrs. Miller took longer than expected. Now, I'm rushing to make it to the homeless shelter before I need to be at the bar for my shift.

Today, it feels like I'm just running from place to place. Not that it's any different on any other day, but at least the pace is usually slower.

The heavy shelter door creaks as I push it open, revealing the bustle of people in the big but rather dark entrance hall. I greet a few familiar faces as I make my way in, my eyes scanning the room for one person in particular.

She exits her office, eyes buried in a stack of papers. "Gloria!" I call out.

She pauses, her gaze shifting from the documents in her hand to me. Her face lights up with a warm smile. "Carolina, what a pleasant surprise!"

We meet halfway, her hand grasping mine in a reassuring squeeze. "It's been too long, dear. How've you been?" she asks, a genuine look in her eyes.

I nod, feeling a pang of guilt. "I'm sorry, I've been swamped lately."

A look of understanding crosses her face as she gives me a sad smile. "Aren't we all? So, what brings you here?"

“Howie. He’s too proud to ask for help himself, but winter is coming, and he isn’t getting any younger,” I say. “Do you have a bed available for him again?”

Gloria’s brow furrows, her fingers absentmindedly stroking her lower lip. “Let’s go see.”

She leads me into her office and sits down behind a well-worn desk. She is a stunning woman, probably in her late fifties, yet she has a youthful glow. The only wrinkles adorning her face are laugh lines around her vibrant green eyes. Her blonde hair is coiled up in a bun, a few strands hanging over her face.

After shuffling through some paperwork, she finally looks up and says, “It seems like we could make room for him, but it wouldn’t be until next week. Would that be okay?”

“That would be fantastic, Gloria. Thank you so much! And he could stay all winter?” I ask.

She grins. “You know I have a soft spot for that cantankerous old man. If it were up to me, he’d be welcome to stay here long-term. But you know Howie, as soon as the weather warms up, he’ll be back on the streets, claiming he doesn’t want to take a spot from someone who needs it more.”

I nod, a slight smile on my face. *That’s just Howie.*

“Well, at least he’ll be safe and warm for a couple months. It’ll give me some peace of mind,” I add gratefully.

Gloria rises from her seat and walks around the desk, resting her hand gently on my shoulder. “And how about you, dear? How are you holding up?” she asks.

I manage to return a small smile. “Still standing,” I reply, echoing the motto of the shelter.

She pulls me in for a brief hug before releasing me, then opens the door for me. “Sometimes, that’s all we can do,” she remarks, a tinge of sadness in her smile.

---

Despite rushing to get to the bar, I manage to send Chiara a text, asking about her day and checking if she's doing her homework. Usually, I would call her, but today, I just don't have the time.

After school, she stays with her best friend Monica and has dinner before returning home. I never want her alone with Roberto for too long, but he's usually out in the evenings.

Thankfully, Monica's mother is a kind woman in her mid-forties, and—while she always looks at me with pity—she's more than willing to care for Chiara when I can't. I give her money to cover Chiara's food whenever I can.

*I have to take what I can get.*

I duck in through the employee's entrance, hang my things in my locker, and tie on my black apron. Then I head to the bar by way of the kitchen. On the way, I nod to our chef, Lennard, and the dishwasher, Matteo, and quickly tie my hair into a ponytail to keep it out of my face while I work.

When I enter the bar area, using my shoulder to open the door, Cindy is sitting on the counter, and Donny is standing between her legs, kissing her neck. I sigh and roll my eyes in annoyance.

Cindy is a tall, beautiful, blonde woman with a body she could model with. I don't understand why she works here instead of being an influencer or something. But to be honest, what she does can't be called work. She mainly flirts with our boss, Donny, and talks my ear off while I do both our jobs.

"Hey," I say, getting a cloth to wipe down all the tables and seats before we open.

"Stop it, Donny, not here." Cindy giggles.

He grunts. "Donny is gonna take you home tonight, and then he's gonna show you just how good his anaconda is."

I nearly gag. I have no sexual experience whatsoever, but if this is what awaits me, I'm more than happy not to get any anytime soon.

Finishing up with the tables, I return to the bar just as Donny walks into the kitchen.

“He’s so adorable, don’t you think?” Cindy asks with heart-filled eyes.

I have to take a deep breath to suppress the urge to roll my eyes again. “Dreamy,” I say simply, grabbing a beer glass and carefully polishing away the water stains left from the dishwasher.

“When are you going to get a boyfriend, Carolina?” she asks me, her elbows on the counter.

*Sure, why would you lift a finger and help me here anyway? It’s not like you get paid for it.*

Trying to divert the conversation, I say, “Oh, it’s ‘boyfriend’ now? Are you guys official?”

She snickers. “No, dummy. You know Donny doesn’t like labels.”

I nod, well aware he isn’t going to end his other two flings, but it’s not my place to reveal them.

“You have such a pretty face, you know that?” she says, gripping my face between her thumb and fingers to make me look up at her, squishing my cheeks. “Those golden eyes and full lips. You’re gorgeous.”

I furrow my brow. “Thank you?”

Cindy has never been kind to me.

“All the guys would want you if you lost that extra weight, you know? You could be even prettier than me if you just went on a diet for a while,” she says, and I nod to myself. *That makes more sense.* Ironically, she genuinely believes she’s complimenting me right now. “It’s such a shame you can’t use that pretty face to your advantage with a body like that.”

I quickly pull away from her and focus on polishing the glasses again. “I can’t do that, can I? How would you manage if all the attention wasn’t solely on you for once?” I respond, sounding bored, but Cindy doesn’t even grasp that it’s meant as a dig at her.

She simply giggles and casually agrees, “That’s true.”

*Can this day be over already?*

---

Finally, my shift is over. Everything hurts. With all the bruises on my belly from this morning, I can barely stand straight anymore. Exhaustion tugs at me while I take off my apron, stashing it in my locker and grabbing my stuff.

Tonight was a good night with generous tips, and because of that, I’ve managed to save up enough just in time for the tattoo appointment I’ve been longing for on my birthday.

*But how can I spend money on something so selfish when I just lost one of my jobs?*

By the time I reach the 7-Eleven, it’s close to two in the morning. I’m super tired, but I need to get groceries. The pantry at home is nearly empty, and I don’t want to imagine Roberto’s reaction if he wakes up to no food.

Spotting Howie at our usual spot, I pull out the burger and Coke I bought for him. “Hey, Howie,” I say, placing the items in his lap.

He greets me back with a smile. “Hey, kid. Better night tonight?”

“Definitely in terms of tips. That’s why you’re getting a special treat tonight,” I say with a wink.

Howie’s fondness for Coke isn’t a secret.

He blushes a little. “You didn’t have to, Lina.”

“I know, but that’s exactly why I love doing it. Plus, I spoke to Gloria about a bed for you.”

“Kid—” He tries to interject.

I cut him off with a firm shake of my head. “No arguments. You have ’til next week to come to terms with it. That’s when she has an available spot for you. But this is non-negotiable.” I fix him with a serious look.

Howie murmurs a quiet “Thank you,” avoiding eye contact and staring at his lap.

Knowing he feels uncomfortable and needs some time alone, I take my leave. “I’m sorry I can’t stay tonight. I need to get these groceries home. But see you tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow,” he agrees, still not looking up.

The breeze lifts strands of hair that escaped from my ponytail, and I release a long sigh. I’m not looking forward to walking the short distance home, but thankfully, it won’t take me long. I am dead on my feet.

I don’t have to enter the apartment quietly because I hear the television blaring loudly as soon as I step inside.

*I hope Chiara can sleep through the noise.*

I’m putting away the groceries when Roberto stumbles in. Clearly drunk, he sways unsteadily, and I mentally prepare myself to run to our room.

“You got my money, pig?” he slurs.

I take the money I had set aside for him from my pocket. “Here it is. There’s an extra twenty dollars because there was none yesterday.”

He takes the money and nods. “See? We can get along just fine when you do as you’re told.”

I can’t hold back my exasperation and respond with a frustrated huff.

He sneers. “Last time I checked, you’re an adult, and if staying here isn’t good enough for you, then you’re more than welcome to leave.”

His words hit a nerve, and my agitation and recklessness grow. “You know perfectly well why I’m still here, and it has nothing to do with you! If I could gain guardianship of her, we would have left a long time ago, and you could figure out how to survive on your own,” I snap.

He laughs at me. “Oh... because that worked out so well for you last time, didn’t it?”

I take a deep breath, desperately trying to control my anger and not punch him.

Nearly a year ago, I went to court, pouring all my efforts into gaining custody of my sister. I worked tirelessly beforehand, even taking up a third job on weekends to afford a lawyer. I applied to become Chiara's legal guardian as soon as I turned twenty-one. I didn't do it earlier because the court advisor told me when I was eighteen that my chances of success before I turned twenty-one were zero if there was another suitable guardian.

So I waited. But my cheap lawyer was terrible, and the judge ruled in Roberto's favor, claiming he was the better guardian, and I was just a young woman trying to juggle college and three jobs, barely making ends meet.

"You know what? You can go by yourself and leave her here." He sneers. "I bet she'll be much better at bringing in money and cooking and all that stuff. And she's a pretty thing and nice to look at. I have a few ideas of what I'd do once you're finally out of my hair."

My stomach churns at his words. That's precisely why I can't leave Chiara here alone. Not that I would have ever considered it, but I know he's dangerous when he drinks, and he is always drunk.

"She's only sixteen, and your niece, you piece of shit." I snarl.

He grabs me by the throat, pushing me against the fridge. "Don't you dare talk to me like that! You do exactly as I say, nothing more, nothing less, or I'll show you just how little I fucking care about her being my sixteen-year-old niece," he threatens.

I nod, unable to speak, as he releases his grip on me. Then I collapse to my knees, gasping for air, my hand clutching my throbbing throat. I don't rise until he walks away.

My hands are trembling as I finish putting away the groceries. The cold milk carton, the softness of the fresh tomatoes, and the crinkling sound of the crisps bag give me

something to focus on, something outside the turmoil within me.

When I'm done, I stand there for a second, eyeing the crisps bag. I glance over at the living room, where the television blares, and Roberto laughs at something the moderator says.

Clutching the bag to my chest, I swiftly make my way to the bathroom, locking the door behind me and sinking to the floor against it. The cold ceramic tiles feel strangely soothing against the back of my thighs.

I take a deep breath and rip the bag open—the familiar salty scent hits my senses. The first one is always the best, and the flavor comforts me instantly. But I don't want to savor them. I need to drown in them. Handful after handful, I try to smother the feeling of emptiness and despair.

The more I eat, the more numb I feel, and the weight of the world temporarily lifts from my shoulders.

But when the last of the salty goodness is gone, reality seeps back in. The empty bag crinkles mockingly in my grip.

My stomach feels heavy, laden with the weight of greasy potatoes and regret. I stand, catching my reflection in the bathroom mirror, and all I can focus on are my chubby cheeks, double chin, and too-big upper arms.

A wave of self-loathing and guilt over what I just did washes over me.

*Why can't I control myself?*

It's not like I feel better after eating my feelings. It's the fucking opposite. And instead of the good taste I savored moments ago, the only thing left in my mouth is an aftertaste of shame and regret.

## CHAPTER FOUR

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### **Carolina**

It took a while to fall asleep because my stomach hurt from how fast I inhaled the crisps. No doubt I will feel it on my hips later.

At least it's already November, so I can wear a black hoodie and a scarf to hide the red marks Roberto left on my throat. I only have two of those hoodies, but they are oversized and hide my tummy, and I love to wear them.

I struggle to stay awake during my Advanced Forensic Toxicology class. I am so tired I can barely keep my eyes open while sitting and trying to pay attention.

When the class finally ends, I stand and prepare to leave, but my professor calls me over. "Ms. Costa, can I speak with you for a moment?"

I cringe internally. She must have noticed me almost falling asleep, and now I will probably get in trouble.

I walk up to her desk, managing not to yawn in her face. "Professor Summer."

"Ms. Costa. I have an opportunity for you that you won't be able to refuse," she says.

I furrow my brow. It wasn't what I had expected her to say. "I'm listening."

"A friend of mine who works in the Crime Analysis Unit at the NYPD headquarters in Lower Manhattan told me that her intern suddenly quit. She asked me if I knew anyone

suitable to replace him,” she says. My eyes widen. It is the best internship opportunity a forensic toxicology student could dream of. “I told her that my favorite student would definitely seize that opportunity.”

I just blink at her in disbelief. “Are you talking about me?” I ask, sounding like a complete idiot.

She laughs. “Of course, I’m talking about you, Carolina. You’re incredibly intelligent and dedicated. I’ve never seen a student as passionate about the subject as you are.”

I blush, feeling both honored and humbled. “Thank you so much. This means a lot.”

She nods approvingly. “So, can I inform her that you’ll start on Monday? Just head to the main office after your classes, and they’ll guide you through everything.”

I nod. “Thank you so much for this incredible opportunity, Professor Summer.”

“Just make sure you don’t quit and make me regret my decision. Landing a job at the NYPD after this internship is in the cards, and it presents a fantastic career pathway. I’ve heard they pay the interns well too. Perhaps well enough for you to leave your other jobs,” she says, surprising me with her knowledge of my personal life. She reaches out and places a hand on my shoulder. “I can’t wait to see what you’ll achieve when you’re not running on just a few hours of sleep every day,” she says, her eyes filled with genuine kindness.

I bite my lip. “Wow... I... thank you,” I manage to say before I hurriedly leave the classroom.

I’m somehow able to keep my bored expression on the outside, but I’m doing a happy dance inside. The last thing I need is for her to see me acting like a fool.

*Oh Dio.*

This is the most incredible thing that has ever happened to me. My ultimate goal has always been to work at the NYPD as a forensic toxicologist, and now it doesn’t feel like an unattainable dream anymore. If I handle this wisely, there’s a real chance I could get hired after college.

I take a deep breath, trying to calm myself.

Initially, I planned to go home, do some laundry, and perhaps take a nap before my shift at the bar. I also wanted to browse the internet for cafés that are hiring. However, my mood has skyrocketed, and my tiredness has vanished completely.

Now that I have secured an awesome, seemingly well-paying job, there's no reason to hold back on getting my tattoo. I pull out my phone and search for the tattoo parlor address, figuring out which subway line I need to take.

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Darkened Dermis, a tattoo shop I've been following for years on social media, is owned by a talented artist named Xander. His work is incredible. I love every piece he posts, and I've always known that if I ever get a tattoo, it would be from him.

The idea for my tattoo has been in my mind for quite some time. The design symbolizes my parents and encompasses the principles I live by, all while reflecting my personal style. I hope Xander can bring this idea to life on my skin exactly as I envision it, but I don't think this will be an issue since his talent speaks for itself. My only concern is whether he will be interested in my concept and has the availability.

My twenty-second birthday is just a week away, and I want to get this tattoo done as a gift to myself. Last year, I treated myself to a nose piercing—a delicate gold ring.

Once a year, I do something solely for me, giving me something to look forward to until Chiara turns eighteen and we can finally leave. I may not have much extra money to spare, but I make it a point to set aside a small portion of my tips throughout the year. At times, I know it's selfish. I could save that money to buy Chiara a bigger birthday gift each June, save for her future, but I need this one thing for me.

As I stand outside the shop, it already appears impressive with a dark and edgy atmosphere I like. The door makes a gentle ding when I open it, and I step inside. The space is

small but surprisingly well-lit, much brighter than I had expected. I imagined it might feel more like a cave, but it's actually inviting. "Sex and Candy" by Marcy Playground plays softly in the back.

To the right, a door swings open, revealing a mountain of a man who steps out while focused on a tablet in his hands. He's dressed in black jeans fastened with a black belt, a fitted black T-shirt, and a black beanie. He has tattoos extending from his throat to his fingers, and I can only imagine there are many more that remain hidden. He sports a light brown beard and a nose ring, and when his gaze meets mine, his big gray eyes fixate on me intently. He doesn't offer a smile as he approaches the register, placing his tablet down and resting both hands on the surface, causing his muscles to bulge as he leans forward.

"Hey, how can I help you?" he asks in a deep voice.

I think he is the most attractive man I have ever seen, and I have to clear my throat before speaking. "Hey, I would like to get a tattoo done by Xander," I say, trying hard to maintain eye contact but feeling the need to look away.

"That would be me," he offers.

I feel like a fool. *How could I sit there and let this scorching-hot man touch my skin for hours without hyperventilating?*

"Sure, sorry," I say, feeling my bored façade slip away under his gaze, making me even more nervous.

"What do you want to get?" he asks, and I get out my phone to show him the sketch I made to explain my idea.

"I would like you to draw it, of course. I just tried to show you what I want with this sketch," I explain.

Xander nods and leans over to get a better look at my phone screen.

I explain the image, "It should be a dead crow lying on its back with its feet in the air, and underneath, it should say 'Memento Vivere' in capital letters, serif font, red ink."

I notice his eyes widen slightly as he looks down at my sketch, but he doesn't show any other expression. *Does he hate it?*

He simply grunts and asks, "Where do you want it?"

I gesture to my left arm, nerves mixing with excitement. "On my inner forearm, below the elbow."

He looks up, his eyes scanning mine for a brief second. "When do you want to have it done? I need a few days for the sketch."

"Do you have any openings on November twenty-sixth?" I ask, trying to sound casual.

He moves to his laptop at the register and checks his calendar. "I can do it in the evening, around six. It will take around two and a half hours."

"Sure, that works for me." I shrug, but inside, I'm squealing.

He taps on his laptop and asks, "What's your name?"

"Carolina," I reply, my voice almost betraying the flutter in my chest.

He nods, entering it into the system. "See you in a week, Carolina."

"Thanks. Bye," I say, my voice a tad more high-pitched than I intended.

I turn, tripping slightly over my own foot in my hurry, and quickly walk out of the shop, hoping he doesn't notice my awkward departure.

As the door closes behind me, my heart still thumping loudly, I take a deep breath.

*I am finally getting my tattoo!*

## CHAPTER FIVE

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### **Carolina**

It's Saturday morning, and since I was let go from the Bread and Bagel café, I find myself with some free time before I have to go to the bar tonight. It bothers me that I haven't had much time for Chiara the last few months due to my busy schedule, so I plan to change that today.

As I prepare scrambled eggs with toast for breakfast, my little sister walks into the kitchen and takes a seat.

"*Buongiorno*," I say with a smile, and quickly make a plate of food to place in front of her, then pour a glass of water for her too. "Did you sleep well?"

"Like a rock."

I chuckle, making myself a plate. "So, same as always. Do you have a lot of homework for the weekend?"

She shakes her head, replying with her mouth full, "Nope, already finished everything."

"*Brava*, that's perfect," I say, sitting down in front of her. "Because I'm free today until I have to go to the bar, so do you want to go to the mall? We can grab some bubble tea and stroll through the bookshop you love so much," I ask, already excited for my first sort of day off in weeks.

She furrows her eyebrows, her mouth turning down. Not the reaction I was looking for at all. "Do I have to? I promised Monica that we would spend the weekend together, and I'm going to sleep over at her place tonight."

“Oh, okay,” I say, trying to hide my disappointment. “No, of course, you don’t have to. I just thought it would be nice to do something together since we haven’t in a while.” I try to sound understanding, even though her words stung.

She rolls her eyes. “Don’t put the blame on me. You’re the one who’s always working.”

I bite my lip, trying to hold back anything I might regret later. Taking a deep breath, I say, “You’re right. I’m sorry. Starting on Monday, I’ll be doing an internship at the NYPD. I’ll see how the hours go, and maybe we can spend more time together in the future. I promise I’ll ask you in advance instead of springing it on you last minute.”

Chiara beams at me. “At the NYPD? That’s what you’ve always dreamed of.”

I smile at her. “Yes, it is.”

Her happiness for me melts away any frustration I just had. I know her occasional attitude is just a phase. Deep down, she’s still my sweet little sister.

“I’m so happy for you,” she says, and I reach out, squeezing her hand.

Shortly after we finish eating, Chiara gets ready and leaves. Feeling lost over what to do next, I deep-clean the apartment before taking a nap.

I somehow wake up just in time to get ready for my shift at the bar. When I arrive, Cindy doesn’t even make an effort to help, so I find myself rushing around, trying to handle everything on my own as usual.

Around midnight, I’m desperate for a break, so I ask her to watch the front while I retreat into the kitchen. Leaning against the wall next to the door, I take a deep breath and briefly close my eyes.

Lennard is leaning on the counter with his arms crossed. He asks, “Tough night?”

I nod, feeling the exhaustion weighing me down. “Just need a minute. Can I have some ice cubes?”

He chuckles. “Don’t you have them out front?”

“Yeah, but they’re out front.”

Matteo joins in with a snicker and walks over to the freezer, grabbing a bowl filled with ice cubes and offering them to me. “Here you go, *carina*,” he says affectionately.

I take one, placing it in my mouth, enjoying the relief as the ice melts on my overheated tongue. There’s nothing quite like the sensation of coolness when you’re exhausted. I close my eyes again and groan, feeling the weariness settling in.

When I reopen my eyes, I notice Matteo watching me with hooded eyes. It makes me take a slight step back. “Thanks,” I say, my voice slightly muffled by the ice cube still in my mouth.

Matteo has asked me out before, but I dismissed him, thinking it was some kind of joke, like the ones they used to play on me in high school. So, I told him I don’t date. He seemed to accept it easily, but I have noticed he often looks at me in a particular way. Cindy has noticed it too, and told me I should go out with him to get that whole virginity thing over with. She said the first time was bad anyway, and it didn’t matter who it was with. At least I wouldn’t die a virgin.

But something about Matteo unsettles me. He isn’t unattractive, even though he is at least fifteen years older than me and not much taller. You can clearly see his Italian heritage in his tanned complexion, shoulder-length black hair, and deep brown eyes.

But his intense gaze always makes me uncomfortable, and the thought of being intimate with him sends shivers down my spine, and they are not good ones.

Let’s see if I say the same when I am still a virgin in ten years.

*Maybe I’ll crawl back to him then.*

Lennard draws me out of my thoughts with a playful grin and the remark, “Your heart is made of stone. You’re a cold bitch, Carolina. I think you can manage a few more dumb customers tonight.”

He might be joking, but something in his teasing resonates deep down. Too exhausted to formulate a response, I don't respond. Instead, I just head back out to the bar to finish my shift.

---

Utterly exhausted, I lay in bed, hugging a pillow tightly to my side, but sleep will not come. Frustrated, I sigh and turn onto my back, releasing the pillow and stretching out like a starfish. It's supposed to be a luxury to have the bed all to myself, but whenever Chiara stays over at Monica's, I feel an even deeper sense of loneliness than usual.

It's times like these that I miss my parents the most.

*How could they have left me alone in all of this?*

But it's not only my parents I miss. There's someone else missing from my life. Someone who cares about me, someone to share the burden with, someone who I can truly be myself with. Howie and Chiara are the only people I let my guard down around. But both of them rely on me. Is it so wrong to want someone I can lean on as well, just for once?

*How can you miss someone you've never met?*

Lennard's words from earlier in the night echo in my mind. The cold-hearted façade I show the world has become my shield, my way of coping with the constant challenges life throws my way. It's the mask I crafted during my high school years, a survival mechanism that helped me navigate through the chaotic mess that was my life.

Being bullied at school just to come home to be abused and bullied some more—I wouldn't have survived that shit show if I hadn't hardened myself to a point where everyone thinks I'm a cold-hearted bitch, not giving a fuck about anyone around me.

He said I have a heart of stone, but if I do, it's a brittle one, already falling apart. Yet, there is no one around to help me pick up the pieces.

Silent tears stream down my face. It's the closest thing to crying I can do anymore.

Maybe I'm becoming as numb as I pretend to be.

I'm not there yet. The pain is still too strong, too noticeable. But I can sense my true self slowly slipping away.

I whisper into the darkness, "Only two more years."

The question that remains is whether or not there will be anything left of me by then.

## CHAPTER SIX

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### **Carolina**

While I don't have any fancy or formal attire, I decide it might be better to go to the internship as I am rather than give the impression of being well-dressed, only for them to see the real me the next day.

So, I opted for a black pair of jeans, my trusty black Converse shoes, and a black Henley. My hair is washed, shining, and looking good. I apply my makeup carefully, adding eyeliner and a dark lip tint.

But first, I have to endure my classes, and my anxiety keeps growing, causing me to tap my knee incessantly. The guy next to me keeps scowling at me for making the repetitive noise, but shooting him a scowl of my own makes him stop.

After class, Professor Summer waits for me at the door and offers a warm, encouraging smile. "You're going to kick ass, Carolina," she says with unexpected enthusiasm. My eyebrows shoot up. I've never heard her speak like that before. "Say hi to Sophia for me," she adds with a wink before walking away, leaving me wondering who the fuck Sophia is.

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The busy main building of the NYPD is a large square structure bustling with activity. Feeling overwhelmed and unsure where to go, I take a deep breath before I get to the reception desk, where an older woman sits.

“Excuse me,” I say. “I’m looking for the Crime Analysis Unit.”

The lady looks up at me from her seat, furrowing her brows. “It’s not open to the public or tourists,” she curtly replies and quickly looks down again.

“Actually, I am starting my internship there today. Carolina Costa.”

She gives me a once-over, scanning me from top to bottom. “Wait a moment,” she says, reaching for the phone.

I glance around, trying to look calm despite my heart pounding in my chest. Laughter erupts from a group of guys nearby, drawing my attention.

A state of shock has me almost dropping my backpack when my eyes catch those of a man in the group. It’s Martin Del Moro, the person who tormented me throughout high school, walking down the hallway with two police officers. He’s wearing an NYPD uniform too.

Martin is tall and, to be honest, quite good-looking. He has dark brown hair and brown eyes that give off a distant impression. But he caused me so much pain and treated me horribly. Even in a million years, I would never find this awful person remotely attractive.

As our eyes lock, I notice a flicker of recognition in his, followed by a sly grin and a wink directed at me. I respond with a bored expression, though deep down, my heart pounds with fear rather than excitement now.

I had no idea Del Moro had become a police officer. His dad is a detective and works for the NYPD, but I didn’t keep tabs on him after high school. I was just glad to be rid of him.

The shock of seeing him pulls me back to one of the crude encounters with the man.

*The sun feels warm on my skin as I sit in the high school courtyard, alone as always. I’m lost in my thoughts, scribbling*

*in my notebook, when a loud, obnoxious laugh breaks my concentration.*

*I glance up and immediately recognize Martin Del Moro strutting by with his usual entourage. They're all laughing at some story he's sharing.*

*"Yeah, man, maybe I really should get tested for STDs with all the sex I have," Del Moro brags, and his friends howl with laughter.*

*I can't help but roll my eyes. I know I should keep quiet, but the words just tumble out. "You can't get an STD from your own hand."*

*The courtyard falls eerily silent. Del Moro freezes, his face contorting with anger. His friends exchange glances, the tension palpable.*

*I immediately regret my outburst. My heart races, and I mentally prepare for the confrontation, letting my mask of indifference fall over my face.*

*Del Moro slowly pivots to face me, his eyes icy. "What did you just say, fatty?" he hisses out, taking a step closer, trying to intimidate me.*

*I swallow hard, trying to find my voice. "I said—"*

*"I heard what you said," he snaps, cutting me off. He leans in so close I can feel his breath on my face. "Jealous, Costa? Because no one could ever control their gag reflex long enough to touch you?" I scowl at him. "You'll need two hands for my package, but it needs a fucking forklift to get to your pussy under all that." He gestures to my stomach.*

*"Yeah, you'll need two hands for sure. One to hold the magnifying glass and one for the tweezers," I retort, crossing my arms over my chest.*

*"You fucking bitch." He spits, grabbing me by my shirt and pulling me to him. "You better watch your back, Costa. Or I am gonna make your life a living hell."*

*As if it wasn't already.*

*His friends snicker, clearly enjoying the spectacle. I feel trapped, my eyes darting around, searching for an escape.*

*With a smug smirk, Del Moro lingers for a moment, letting his threat hang in the air. Then, he lets go of me and, with a final menacing glare, turns and walks away. His friends trail behind, their laughter echoing mockingly.*

“Ah... you seem like a lost newbie,” a sweet voice says from my right, pulling me back to the present.

I desperately hope this department is large enough that I won't have to see him often. I don't want this to become another season of the hell I endured.

I turn my head, gazing slightly upward to meet a pair of pretty dark brown eyes and the beautiful face of a young Korean woman with long, dark hair and fair skin. “Hey, I'm Sophia, and you must be Carolina, my new intern, right?” She extends her hand for a shake.

Her hand is delicate in mine as I shake it. “Nice to meet you,” I say. “I apologize for being late. The security check at the door took longer than expected.” I grimace, disappointed in myself for making a bad first impression.

“Oh, don't worry. I already guessed as much. We'll get you a badge as soon as possible.” She turns to the woman at the reception desk and asks, “Margaret, could you start working on a badge for Carolina, please? We'll be down in my lab if you need anything.”

Margaret responds with a smile, her previous grumpy mood nowhere to be found.

“Let's go. I'll show you where the magic happens,” Sophia whispers to me, wagging her eyebrows.

She seems genuinely nice, and having a friendly face around here is more than I could have hoped for, even if she seems overly outgoing.

We navigate the building, and I'm certain I'll get lost when navigating on my own during the first few months. When we

finally reach her lab, Sophia opens the door, and my eyes widen at the sight before me.

“There, in the back, is the office area with our desks. Yours is right next to mine. We’ll use them for analytics or regular computer work,” she explains. Pointing to the left side of the lab, she continues, “Over there, we have all our equipment and chemicals. If you need something and can’t find it, please let me know.”

I take in the surroundings, and I get all giddy inside.

*This is amazing!*

She gestures toward the lab tables in front of us and says, “And here we have my babies. Our laboratory equipment. You’ll be working with specialized tools to perform various analyses on biological samples. We have gas chromatography, liquid chromatography, mass spectrometry, and spectrophotometry systems, and other analytical instruments specific to toxicology, some so new you may not have heard about them yet.” As she talks, I can’t stop my mouth from dropping open in awe.

“This is—” I begin.

Sophia interrupts me with a smile. “So cool, right?”

I nod in response. “Really cool,” I manage to say.

“Susanne mentioned that you’re a bit of a geek like me and maybe a bit socially awkward too. So, it looks like we’ll get along well.”

A huff escapes me. *Well, it seems Professor Summer isn’t afraid to speak her mind.*

“I can’t wait to try everything,” I say.

Sophia’s face lights up.

As the day wears on, I realize Sophia is truly a gem. She’s incredibly kind and full of quirks. Maintaining my professional distance and reserved demeanor becomes increasingly difficult as I catch myself relaxing and enjoying her company more and more.

I genuinely want to be friends with her, to have a level of comfort at work. However, I remind myself that she is still my boss, and it's important to maintain appropriate boundaries.

After a while of working in comfortable silence, Sophia breaks it by asking, "You're in your last year, right?"

I glance up from what I am doing, answering, "Yes, that's correct."

She nods. Then, with a curious expression, she asks, "And can you see yourself working here?"

"Absolutely. More than just that, it has been my dream to work here. It's the reason I chose to study this subject in the first place."

A smile crosses her face. "That's good to hear. You know, I just got promoted to the youngest team leader in this department. I can assemble my own team now. I'm aware that you and your classmates will soon be searching for jobs after graduation, and I don't want you to consider other options. I want you to be part of my team."

My eyes widen in disbelief. "Me? But we've only been working together for a few hours."

Sophia smiles. "I have a good sense of people, and I see potential in you. I believe in your abilities and what you can bring to the team. You have a lot to offer." I'm taken aback by her confidence in me. "You don't know how many incompetent people I've worked with so far," she says with a chuckle. "I can see that you know what you're doing. You handle the equipment with care, you clean up after yourself, and Susanne spoke highly of you. She's a good friend of mine, and I trust her judgment."

I'm about to open my mouth to thank her when the door opens and two officers enter without knocking. I mend my face into my usual bored expression and stand straight. The taller of them, he's maybe six foot one, is an attractive guy with short brown hair, longer on top, some dark stubble, full lips, and brown eyes. He crosses his muscular arms over his chest and grins at me.

I steel myself. It's almost always the too-hot-to-be-true guys that are the meanest.

He looks me up and down, commenting, "Oh, look, another one with way too many brain cells."

My hackles rise, but I keep my face and tone bored when I answer, "Why, you need some?"

He looks at me with comically wide eyes before he starts to chuckle.

The guy beside him laughs out loud, and I turn to him. He is a bit shorter but still tall at maybe six feet and appears Korean, like Sophia. His black hair is tousled, making me want to push it out of his dark eyes. He smiles a beautiful smile at me, dimples showing, and handsome as hell.

He is still cackling when he asks, "Marry me?"

I look at Sophia, hoping this whole thing didn't just make a negative impression. But all I get in response is a dismissive eye roll and an annoyed huff. "Carolina, the one just proposing to you is my younger brother, Josh, and the dumbass next to him is his partner, Clay," she introduces.

Clay steps toward me, extending his hand as if he wants to shake mine. Yet, his hand swiftly retreats when I give it a critical look, crossing my arms over my chest.

"I was going to say it's nice to meet you... but now I'm not so sure anymore." He smirks.

Josh says in a kind voice, "Don't mind him. It truly is nice to meet you, Carolina. Are you the new intern?"

"Yes, and she's also my new teammate. I just hired her after graduation," Sophia says. I turn to her, and she shoots me a grin.

"That's awesome," Josh says, his eyes full of interest as they lock onto mine. "We came to ask Sophia if she was down to grab an early dinner with us. You're more than welcome to join. Looks like we'll be bumping into each other more often now anyway."

I don't eat in front of others when I can avoid it. *And let's be real, I doubt I can afford the places they eat at.*

"No, thank you," I say.

Sophia searches my face before she nods. "Maybe next time. But grab your stuff and head out with us. Don't want you getting lost in the maze already."

"It's only five," I point out, double-checking my phone. Sophia had told me we'd be working until five thirty.

She just shrugs and says, "We should take it easy on day one. Feel free to head home."

I'm not going to argue with that. Maybe I'll have enough time to grab something to eat for Howie and me before my bar shift begins at six thirty.

I pick up my things and trail behind them out of the room. They're chatting between themselves, so I hang back, but I catch how Josh shoots me a look over his shoulder.

As we reach the front desk, Sophia stops, and Margaret gives her a friendly smile.

"Did you have a good day, dear?" Margaret asks.

Sophia replies with a beaming smile of her own. "I did, thanks! How about you?"

The elderly woman nods in response, and Sophia leans in slightly over the counter. "Did you have a chance to make a badge for my newbie?"

I frown, catching Clay's smirk out of the corner of my eye.

"Not yet, but I can whip up a temporary one for now. Was it... Karen?"

Clay laughs, hastily covering his mouth with his hand when I glare at him. On the other hand, Josh openly grins at me, clearly finding this funny too.

"No, it's Carolina Costa. She's the new intern in the forensic toxicology department," Sophia corrects her, and Margaret begins typing my name into her computer.

“Ah... there she is,” she announces before printing something. She passes me a sheet of paper with a QR code. “This is your temporary badge. You’ll need it to get in until I can get your permanent one sorted. Keep it with you at all times, and don’t lose it,” she instructs, her voice taking on a stern note that was absent when talking to Sophia.

“Thank you,” I mumble, turning toward Sophia. “So, same time tomorrow?”

She pulls me into a hug, catching me off guard. She laughs when she sees my surprised face as she pulls away. “You better be here!” she declares before heading off. Then she calls over her shoulder, “Let’s go, boys. I’m starving.”

Clay grins and salutes me, then turns to follow Sophia. But Josh hangs back for a moment longer.

“Have a good evening, Carolina,” he says, smiling. There is a tingle in my chest, but I just nod as he also heads off.

I take a deep breath.

*This is going to be interesting.*

## CHAPTER SEVEN

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### **Josh**

My plate is heaped with spring rolls when I head back to find Clay and Sophia already settled in our usual spot in the NYPD cafeteria. The food here isn't the best, but it's convenient given our crazy work schedules rarely allow us to meet elsewhere for meals.

Sliding into the seat next to Clay, I catch the last part of what he's saying, "... so glad that jerk's finally gone. Couldn't stand seeing his face every time I ate." His words are garbled by a mouthful of spaghetti.

"Who are we talking about?" I ask, taking a big bite out of a spring roll. *It's surprisingly not too bad today.*

"Justin, of course," Sophia says, rolling her eyes. "But he's gone now, Clay. I've got a new intern. No need to bring him up anymore."

I can't help but grin at her words. "Yeah, Clay, one less person for you to torture," I tease.

He shoots me a look, not amused. "I didn't torture him. He was just a homophobic, ego-tripping jerk, and I didn't like him."

Sophia takes a swig from her water bottle, not missing a beat. "Oh, don't worry, you made that abundantly clear. I think part of the reason he quit was your snide remarks at every meal."

Clay just shrugs, twirling spaghetti on his fork. “Not my fault he can dish it out but can’t handle it being thrown back at him.”

I bite my lip to hold back a smile.

*Clay can be a total pain in the ass when he wants to be.*

Sophia shoots him a stern look, pointing her fork at him. “I swear to God, Cooper, if you scare off my new intern too, I will kick your ass. I want her to stick around.”

I think about the witty, beautiful girl with the captivating cat eyes. *Yeah, I’d like her to stay too.*

She’s the first one who’s left Clay speechless, a sight I’d pay to see again.

The corner of Clay’s mouth lifts in a smirk, eyes still on his plate as he replies, “I don’t think I could scare her away even if I tried.”

“So don’t,” Sophia says.

Clay turns my way. “What do you think about her?”

I give a noncommittal shrug, not wanting to hand him any fodder to tease me with for days. “She seems nice.”

His grin widens devilishly as he says, “Nothing on that girl is nice. She is a feisty little thing. But that gets you off. So much so you asked her to marry you.”

I huff at him. “She managed to insult you without even trying. I think that alone makes her worth keeping around.”

“Jerk,” he retorts, setting off Sophia’s laughter again.

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## **Carolina**

“Lina?” Howie questions, surprised as he lifts his gaze from his lap to me.

“Here,” I say, tossing him a sandwich packet as I sit next to him on the ground.

“Why are you here during the day?” he asks, looking puzzled.

“I started an internship with the NYPD today. They let me leave early, so I thought maybe you’d have time to grab dinner with me before my shift starts,” I say.

He smiles. “I think I can squeeze you into my busy schedule, kiddo.” He opens the sandwich packet, inhaling deeply before turning back to me. “Thank you.”

I return his smile. “Yeah, I figured you might want a break from burgers for once, so I picked up some sandwiches on my way.” I take a bite of my egg sandwich.

“I like the burgers.” He shrugs, taking a bite as well.

“You’ll get one later tonight, but for now, it’s this,” I say. I open my sandwich to inspect its contents and grimace. “Ugh, who puts pickles on an egg sandwich?”

Howie laughs and opens his sandwich too, so I place my unwanted pickle into his. “You learn to eat anything when you’ve had to for long enough.”

“I know, I know, but there are limits.” I shudder.

“So, you’re interning with the cops?” he asks.

I nod, taking a moment to swallow before responding, “Yep. I’m working in the Crime Analysis Unit, but yeah, it’s with the cops. I just handle tasks in the lab.”

“Good for you. I’m not a fan of those asshats, but good for you.”

I chuckle. “Yeah, some of them are asshats for sure, but not all of them. I like it so far. We’ll see how it goes.”

Once I finish my sandwich, I glance at my phone. If I start walking now, I’ll make it to the bar just in time. I stand, collecting Howie’s trash along with mine. “I’ll see you later?”

“Don’t let them get to you,” he mumbles.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

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### **Carolina**

“That badge is not valid, ma’am.”

I’ve never been called ma’am before, and I’m not sure if I like it.

“It has to be valid, though. The receptionist made it for me just yesterday.”

The officer on security duty tries scanning it again, but the sound the machine makes isn’t reassuring. “I’m sorry, ma’am, but you have to go through the security check with the visitors.”

I bite my lip. Everything is going wrong. I’m going to be late on my second day too. It’s just perfect. If I keep messing up like this, Sophia will definitely take back her job offer.

“We can bring her in with us, Joey,” a kind voice says behind me. I turn around and look up at Josh. “She’s Sophia’s new intern. I can vouch for her.”

The security officer simply shrugs. “Sure, the badge seems legit. It’s just issued under the wrong name.”

I roll my eyes. *Margaret, you scrawny assed bitch.*

“Let me guess, it’s for a Karen?” Clay chuckles from behind Josh, and I only notice him now.

“It is!” The security guard says, looking down at me. “Is that your name?”

I’m about to say no when Clay says, “It is now.”

Josh guides me into the building, and once we're a few steps away from the crowd at the entrance, I turn to him. "Thanks. Getting back in line would have sucked."

Josh places a hand on the small of my back and gently nudges me to keep walking, but he presses on a bruise, which makes me flinch. "No problem. Let's get your badge fixed."

I step away from him, and his hand falls back to his side. "No, that's okay. I'm already late and need to find my way to the lab. I'll take care of it after work."

"Don't be silly, *Karen*." Clay pulls out his phone from his pocket. "I'll text Sophia and let her know why you're running late."

I glare at him, but when I turn around, we're already standing in front of the reception desk, and Josh smiles at a grumpy-looking Margaret.

He takes the paper from my hand and hands it to her. "Good morning. Did you sleep well?" he asks, attempting some small talk, but she merely raises an eyebrow at him. It's comforting to know I'm not the only one she hates. "So, the badge you made for Carolina has the wrong name on it, and she can't use it like this. Could you please make her a new one?" he asks her in a much more polite tone than I would have.

Margaret takes the paper from his grip and scans it. "What wrong name? You told me her name," she says. "Here, Karen Costa, just like you told me."

"It's Carolina," I say, and she shoots me a glare.

"Why didn't you tell me that yesterday?"

"I did," Sophia says from my right. I turn as she approaches, smiling at me before addressing Margaret. "It must have been a misunderstanding."

The old lady's expression softens. "Oh, I'm sorry, honey. Of course, I'll change it. I'll have her badge done this evening."

Sophia pats her wrinkly hand. “That would be so nice of you. Thank you, my dear.”

I stare at Josh with wide eyes and mouth, *What the...*

A wide grin spreads across his face. Sophia grabs my wrist and pulls me along as we walk. “She’s the old lady whisperer,” Josh says, his voice filled with amusement now that we’re out of the grumpy woman’s earshot.

Sophia releases my wrist. “Oh, shut up. She’s nice!”

Clay walks beside me while the siblings walk ahead. “Yeah, nice to you. No one else,” he grumbles.

As we reach a corner where the hallway splits into two directions, Sophia smiles. “Thank you for finding my lost sheep.”

I give her my mask of indifference.

“Anytime,” Clay says, winking at me.

We’re about to walk off in separate directions when Del Moro and another cop approach from the direction Josh and Clay are about to head. I automatically position myself in front of Sophia, not wanting her to get pulled into Del Moro’s shit. Clay notices my movement and looks at me with furrowed brows.

Del Moro sneers at me as he passes by, saying, “Seems like they let the trash in now.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “Yeah, but you already know that since you’re here.”

He glares at me before walking away, shouting, “Get lost, Costa.”

Clay looks after Del Moro before he turns back to me. “What the fuck was that?”

I just shrug, walking in the direction of Sophia’s lab, lost in yet another incident I will never be able to forgive Del Moro for.

*Chiara and I are at the subway station near her school, where I just picked her up. She's crying, and I'm holding her close. In her hand is a paper with a low grade, not the first one she's gotten recently.*

*It's only been three months since we lost our parents, and she's struggling to sleep. Everything is just too much. We lost our parents, moved out of our home, and now live in a run-down apartment with our asshole of an uncle.*

*He wasn't a nice guy even before we had to live with him, and I never liked him, but now he's always drunk and angry, so we mostly try to stay out of his way.*

*Since Roberto doesn't lift a finger, I've had to find two jobs to cover our rent and food, all while still going to high school. I even told a bar owner I was older than I am so I could work there at night.*

*Chiara doesn't see the full picture. To her, she's lost her parents and her home and feels like I'm not there for her. I want to be there more than anything. She is all I have now too. But if I don't work, we'll soon be homeless or without food.*

*Since I'm not there, and she is grieving, alone too much, and only fucking eleven years old, she is slacking. At first, her teachers were understanding, but apparently, their patience is running thin.*

*I move in front of her, placing my hands on her shoulders and bending down to meet her eyes. She's wiping away tears, trying to hold back more. "Hey, piccola," I soothe. "We'll work on your next assignment together, okay? You'll improve your grade in no time."*

*She nods but can't meet my eyes, and another tear rolls down her cheek. I can't remember the last time I saw her smile. Lately, all she does is cry, and it's breaking my heart. But I don't know what to do.*

*I am struggling not to drown in grief myself.*

*Drawing her close, I give her a comforting hug, kissing her forehead. "How about some ice cream?"*

*I earned good tips last night, and even though it isn't in the budget, sometimes you have to bend the rules, especially if it might bring a smile to her face.*

*But before she can respond, loud laughter echoes from behind us. Del Moro and his friends are approaching, heading to our platform. My heart sinks. Quickly, I turn us both so we're facing away from them.*

*"Stay calm," I whisper to Chiara, but it seems he's already seen us.*

*"Costa!" Del Moro shouts. I briefly shut my eyes, drawing in a deep breath, trying to gather my courage, then I arrange my face into a blasé expression, shielding Chiara as I turn to face him.*

*We lock eyes, and I say nothing. Del Moro walks toward me with a malicious grin. "Haven't I told you that you're not allowed to use the subway anymore?"*

*"Fuck off, dickhead" I reply flatly.*

*Undeterred, he steps closer. I stand my ground, maintaining eye contact. But his eyes dart behind me. "What's this?" He snatches Chiara's paper from her hand and scans it.*

*I reach out to take it back from him, but he rips it to shreds. "Looks like stupidity runs in your family."*

*"Kind of like syphilis runs in yours, I guess." I know I'll regret that, but I can't let him belittle Chiara when she's already so down.*

*His friends laugh and jeer from behind, but Del Moro's face twists with fury. "You've just proved how fucking stupid you are."*

*He seizes the strap of my backpack and yanks, sending me sprawling onto the pavement. Pain shoots through my knees and palms.*

*I turn to see Del Moro focus his cold gaze on the trembling Chiara, who looks like a deer in headlights. Without warning, he forcefully pushes her, and she tumbles down onto the subway tracks below.*

*Panic overtakes me as I scramble to the edge and stretch my hand toward her, but she's too far down, and I can't reach her.*

*"Don't touch the rails!" I yell.*

*"Lina!" she screams, fear in her voice while she jumps and tries to reach my hand.*

*Desperate, I pull off my backpack and let it fall to the ground before jumping onto the tracks, bending down, and positioning myself as a human ladder for Chiara. "Climb up, quick!"*

*Using my back and shoulders as steps, Chiara scrambles up and back onto the platform, shaken but safe.*

*But now, I'm the one stranded on the tracks. The familiar hum of an approaching subway train grows louder, the glaring headlights drawing closer. My panic escalates as I desperately jump and try to grip the edge of the platform, but it's too high for me to reach.*

*As the train roars nearer, two of Del Moro's friends get cold feet and rush over to extend their arms down toward me. I grasp their hands tightly, and they pull with all their might, yanking me up and out of the path of the oncoming train just in the nick of time.*

*The subway cars rush past before coming to a halt. As I regain my breath, trembling from the shock and adrenaline, I look up to see Del Moro sneering.*

*"You guys are such fucking pussies," he jeers at his friends before laughing and boarding the subway car with them.*

*"Get lost, Costa!" he yells before the doors close behind him.*

*Shaken but alive, I pull Chiara close, letting her cry into my shoulder while I try to calm my racing heart.*

We arrive at the office door, and I shake my head to release the memory that has just gripped me. Del Moro clearly hasn't changed one bit since high school, and his presence only adds

another layer of tension to my already stressful day. His spewing shit in front of my new boss is just the icing on the cake.

Sophia opens the door and motions for me to get inside. As I enter, I take a moment to compose myself. *I can't let his toxicity affect my focus.*

Sophia closes the door behind us and sits behind her desk while I settle into the chair in front of mine. “Do you want to fill me in?” she asks, her voice filled with genuine concern. “I’ve worked a few cases for Del Moro and he’s seems a real pain, but that was brutal.”

I keep my face blank but just barely. “There is some history there. But I won’t let it distract me from work.”

“That’s the spirit,” she says, her smile widening. “Now, let’s focus on the task at hand. I’ve prepared some samples for you to analyze today. We’ll be working on a case regarding a car crash involving potential drug intoxication.”

My heart skips a beat. My parents died in a car accident. According to the toxicology report, they were intoxicated while driving. I never believed that. My parents weren’t even drinkers, rarely having more than the occasional glass of wine, and they would have never taken drugs.

I tried to voice my doubts, but no one took me seriously as a seventeen-year-old. I was met with dismissive responses, insisting that parents sometimes do things their kids don’t know about. It made me so mad that I decided to become a forensic toxicologist. That way, I can ensure mistakes like that don’t happen to anyone else.

Sophia takes a sip from her big-ass mug. I have to suppress a laugh when I see what is written on it. *Tea. Forensics. Sleep. Repeat.*

“Put on your coat and gloves, and let’s get started.”

I quickly slip into the lab coat, making sure it fits properly and put on the gloves. I can’t help but marvel at the array of instruments and tools before me.

This is where the real magic happens.

Sophia guides me through the process of analyzing the samples, explaining each step and providing some insights along the way. Hours pass by in a blur, and finally, we reach a breakthrough.

Sophia points to a chart displaying the results of our analysis. “Look at this,” she says, excitement in her voice. “We’ve now identified the specific drug compound that could be the cause of the intoxication. This could be a significant lead in the case.”

I study the chart, feeling proud to have been part of this, but at the same time, my heart hurts. This hasn’t been an easy task, but it is doable.

*So how could they have fucked up so badly when it came to my parents’ case?*

## CHAPTER NINE

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### **Carolina**

“Carolina, get your ass over here!” Lennard’s voice echoes, his silhouette framed by the half-open door to the kitchen, propped up by his shoulder.

“On my way!” I holler back, weaving my way through the patrons crowding the bar.

Tonight is busy, and a bachelor party showed up half an hour ago, keeping me on my toes with a continuous stream of orders.

Cindy is conspicuously absent, and sweat trickles down my forehead. The heat in the bar is scorching, and my running around only makes it worse.

With my back, I push open the door to the kitchen, spinning around to ask, “What?”

Lennard thrusts four plates piled with fries and nuggets into my hands. “You forgot this order,” he mutters, a scowl creasing his forehead.

“Calm down, I didn’t forget it. I’ve been too swamped to pick it up until now. In case you hadn’t noticed, the bar is bursting at the seams, and I’m the only one here.”

Matteo steps in front of me, pressing an ice cube to my lips and popping it into my mouth. I look at him with wide eyes, taken aback but unable to push him away, my hands full with the plates.

“Easy, *carina*. Save your fire for outside.” He laughs.

I'd like to counter, but my mouth is full. Besides, I can already hear the bachelor party guys hollering for another round. So I simply spin on my heels and head back out to deliver the food.

I take the next order from the guys and slide six frosty beers onto the table, assuring them, "I'll be back with the rest," before returning to the bar.

"Check out that big, round ass," one of them drawls to his friends. "I bet it shakes for hours if you give it a good slap."

*What a fucking asshole.* Seething, I get the remaining beers.

I hate that I'm working and can't set that jerk straight.

"Here's the rest," I say, setting the beers from my tray onto their table. "Anything else?"

The offensive guy shares a smirk with his buddies before turning to me, saying, "Yeah, but I don't think it's on the menu." His gaze roams my body.

"You couldn't afford it even if it was," I say, but it only earns me a chorus of chuckles.

"What's it gonna take to get into those pants?" he slurs as his finger catches one of my belt loops, pulling me closer.

I swat his hand away. "I already have one asshole down there. I don't need another."

I turn to leave, but a hard slap lands on my ass, making me jump. "See? Told you it jiggles." The guy guffaws with his buddies.

I'm ready to slap him back, my hand raised in the air when Donny's shout reverberates across the bar. "Costa!"

I let my hand drop and glare at the guy once more before turning and walking toward the bar where Cindy and Donny have mysteriously reappeared.

Donny grips my upper arm, leading me through the door into the kitchen. He releases me abruptly, causing me to stagger a few steps.

“Did I just see what I think I did? Were you about to slap a customer?” His voice is loud and furious.

“That asshole hit me first!” I protest, spreading my arms wide in disbelief.

“Just because your virgin ass isn’t used to getting some action, you can’t act like a nun around the patrons! Cindy gets catcalled and hit on all the fucking time and takes it like a trooper, and for once, a blind fucker makes a move on you, and you turn into a prude?”

I can’t believe this guy. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Carolina,” Matteo interjects in a low voice, attempting to grab my arm. I jerk it out of his grasp, giving him a sharp look.

“No, I won’t just let this slide. I’m the only one in this godforsaken bar who actually works, and you’re telling me I can’t even defend myself?”

“Defend yourself from what? A guy who’s drunk enough to find you attractive?”

“That’s it, I’m fucking done with this shit show,” I yell.

“No, this shit show is done with you. You’re fired. Get your stuff and *get out* of my bar,” Donny shouts.

Cindy steps closer to him, clinging to his arm. “Donny, you can’t fire her. We need her,” she whispers, but he shrugs her off.

“Go be useless somewhere else.” He snarls at her while I remove my apron and crumple it into a ball before tossing it at Donny’s feet.

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The night air is cold as I walk to the 7-Eleven, still fuming.

*Who does he think he is?*

I’ve endured a fucking lot in my life, and I know how to just take it and shut my mouth, but I’m not going to be told my

body must be available while I work and anyone can just touch it if they want.

If I thought I could be a prostitute, I would be. The pay would be much better.

Howie is sitting in our usual space, and I let myself fall beside him, the concrete hitting my butt hard. I drop my head into my hands.

“What’s wrong, kid? What are you doing here already?” Howie asks, concerned.

I sit there, rocking back and forth, desperately tugging at my hair.

*What the hell did I just do?*

Yeah, I despised that job, but it paid decently, and the tips were usually good. Now that I’ve lost it, I don’t know how to make things work.

“I messed up,” I whisper.

“What happened?” Howie asks, his voice filled with gentleness. But I can’t stop rocking to form a reply. My head feels like it’s spinning out of control. “Kid,” he says softly, placing a hand on my back.

The gesture momentarily halts my rocking, and I look up at him. Howie and I have never touched each other before. We’ve always just sat side by side and talked.

Tears well up in my eyes. “I got fired.”

His gaze softens even more, and there’s so much compassion in his voice as he says my name. “Lina.”

A sob bursts out of me, and I start crying. I can’t remember the last time I cried in front of someone, maybe at my parents’ funeral. I usually don’t allow myself to break down while anyone can see. I never let my guard down completely. But now, here I am, sobbing because I lost a job that paid our rent, all because of a stupid slap on the ass and my big mouth.

Howie wraps an arm around my shoulder, pulling me close in a side hug. He leans his head against mine. “You’ll find another job, Lina. Nobody works as hard as you do. Everyone will want you, and you’ll have a new job in no time,” he assures me, swaying slowly from side to side as he comforts me.

“And what if I don’t?” I sniffle, trying hard to regain my composure.

“Then you’ll find another way. You’ve always found a way,” he says softly, gently stroking my upper arm.

I slowly pull away from the embrace, looking into his bright blue eyes that stand out in his dirty face. “I’m so sorry for breaking down on you.”

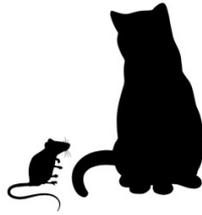
“You didn’t break down, kid. You just needed a moment. You grew up surrounded by emotional chaos, and you find comfort in the pain. This is just another rock on the road.” He nods at me, leaning back against the concrete wall.

“Thank you for being here for me,” I whisper, rising to my feet.

“You’re the closest thing to family for an old lost man like me. Of course, I’m here.” He huffs. “Now go home and get an extra hour of sleep. All this emotional stuff is making me tired.”

## CHAPTER TEN

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### **Carolina**

The following day, it's like I've been hit by a train. I didn't get a wink of sleep, even though I had more than enough time to do so.

I'm in a state of panic.

Panicking about how the hell I'm going to manage to pay all our bills. I still have no idea how much the internship will pay me or if it will even be enough.

The year-end payments are looming over me, not to mention Christmas. Chiara needs a laptop for her classes, and I could use some warmer clothes. My old leather jacket isn't cut out for winter.

Then there's the tattoo appointment I've scheduled. I can't and won't cancel it now. I'm certain Xander has already worked on the sketch, and I'm not the kind of person to back out, especially when I want something. But my mind is swirling with worst-case scenarios.

Fortunately, Margaret made me a new badge yesterday, allowing me to enter the NYPD headquarters through the employee line, which is much quicker.

Confident I remember at least half the way to the lab, I hope for the best and head in what I think is the right direction. As I navigate the crowded space, a group of at least thirty police officers comes my way. I move closer to the wall to avoid walking through the middle of them.

However, Del Moro, who is part of the group along with his blond partner, spots me and loudly utters as they pass, “Fat bitch.”

I hold my head high, maintaining my impassive expression, and retort without breaking my stride, “Been called a lot worse by a lot better.”

I notice Josh is part of the group too, when he walks up beside me, looking concerned as he glances back and forth between the back of Del Moro’s head and me.

Clay, who is just behind Josh, grins at me. “Karen,” he says, mockingly tipping an imaginary hat to greet me.

I roll my eyes at his antics and pick up my pace, hoping to find my way as quickly as possible.

Seeing Del Moro has become a trigger, and I wish I could stop the memories before they start.

*The cafeteria is buzzing with the usual high school chatter. I find a quiet corner, settling down at a table by myself. The peanut butter and jelly sandwich in my hand is more than just lunch. It’s the first thing I’ve eaten today. Because of how tight money has been for the last few days, I have to make sure that there is enough for Roberto and Chiara first.*

*A shadow looms over me as I’m about to take a bite. I don’t need to look up to know who it is. Del Moro stands there with his posse, smirking down at me. Before I can react, he slaps the sandwich out of my hand, sending it tumbling to the floor.*

*“Trying to put on more weight, fatty?” He sneers.*

*His friends chuckle behind him.*

*I take a deep breath, refusing to let him see how much his words sting. “You have your entire life to be an idiot,” I retort. “Why not take today off?”*

*His eyes narrow, clearly not expecting me to fight back since it’s the first time ever today. “If I looked like you, I’d kill myself.”*

*I raise an eyebrow, refusing to let him get to me. "If I had a dog with a face like yours," I shoot back, "I'd shave its ass and teach it to walk backward."*

*His friends holler, some even clapping. Del Moro's face turns a shade of red I didn't think was possible. In a fit of rage, he grabs my backpack, holding it out before turning it over. My books, pens, and personal shit scatter across the floor. He drops the empty bag beside me with a smirk, and they walk away, leaving me with the mess.*

*I take a moment to compose myself, then slowly start picking up my things.*

*I won't let him just walk over me.*

*Not anymore.*

---

Somehow, I actually find the lab and knock before opening the door that reads *Lee*.

"Are you fucking kidding me, Carolina?" Sophia bursts out as I step in, freezing me in my tracks.

*Shit, what did I do?*

"Why are you knocking? This is your office too!" She gives me an eye roll, then goes back to digging through her desk drawer.

Exhaling, I apologize, "Sorry. Everything all right?"

Sophia grabs her phone, furiously typing away. She looks annoyed. "It's way past lunch, and I haven't had my tea yet. How can everything be all right?"

"Seriously? Tea?" I question, but her dirty look makes me zip my lips real quick.

Sophia sighs and slumps into her office chair. "Fuck."

"Do you want me to grab some for you? I saw there is a cafeteria here," I offer.

“No, I texted Josh. He’ll bring some when he gets back from their info session.”

Nodding, I boot up my computer. “All right. So, what’s on the agenda today?”

I get the message loud and clear from her icy stare—now is not the time to ask her shit. So, instead, I review yesterday’s papers to stay out of her way.

After maybe an hour, the door opens, and Clay walks in.

Sophia practically bolts toward him, snatching the to-go cup from his hands. Before she can take a sip, Clay stops her by putting his hand over the lid.

“Whoa there, woman. Careful! It’s hot.”

Sophia makes a sound almost like a hiss before turning and stomping back to her desk. But once she sits and starts sipping her tea, she looks blissful, humming contentedly.

“I forgot who I was dealing with for a second there,” Clay shrugs. When I look back at him, I see Josh has joined him, walking toward my desk with another cup.

“I didn’t know what kind of tea you like, but I thought we couldn’t go wrong with black,” he says, smiling at me and placing it on my desk.

“Yeah, as black as your soul,” Clay chimes in with a snicker, and Josh glares in return.

Had I not perfected my poker face over the years, I would’ve smirked. But instead, I offer him a nonchalant glance before turning to Josh. “Thanks.”

“No worries. You’ll soon figure out that green tea is the key to a pleasant workday,” he says.

“So, how’d the info session go, boys? Learn anything interesting?” Sophia asks.

“Nah, same stuff as always. But I gotta say, I’m not a fan of the rookies. They’re getting bolder each year. One of them even shoved me aside on our way back. Back in our day, rookies respected their superiors,” Clay grumbles.

“Oh, are the kiddos not showing you respect, Clay?” Sophia asks with a sarcastic tone. “Try being Josh’s big sister and dealing with you three boys clinging to me all the fucking time during your teenage years.”

Clay just snorts. “Karen, seems like you’re in for a great day at work,” he says, looking at me.

I glance up from my computer, “Why, you’re leaving?”

He furrows his brows, “Well, yeah, but... what?”

Josh snickers, slapping Clay on the shoulder. “Let’s go before the ladies make a kebab out of you.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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### **Carolina**

“Heads up!” I call out, tossing the still-warm burger to Howie.

He seems a bit surprised but catches it just fine. “Kid, it’s barely past six. What are you doing here?”

“No way, really? You’re getting old, Howie. I got fired,” I say, plopping down on the ground next to him.

“You brat. I know you got fired. I meant, *why* are you *here*? You don’t have a shift or any other place to be. Why aren’t you doing something fun? Like sleeping for once?” he asks, tearing open the burger wrapper and inhaling deeply. “Thanks.”

He’s shivering. The weather is getting colder and more blustery each day.

“Just wanted to see if you’re ready to head to the shelter with me tomorrow. Can we handle your stuff on our own, or should I ask Gloria if she can send some help?”

“No need to babysit me. And I’ll manage just fine with my Lamborghini,” he says.

I glance at the shopping cart that holds all his worldly possessions.

“All right, fine. But I’m coming with you, no questions. I wanna see you tucked into that bed with my own eyes,” I say, giving him a stern look.

“Sometimes I wonder if you realize I’m the adult here,” he grumbles.

“Hey, I’m an adult too!” I protest, taking a big bite of my burger.

He shrugs. “Barely.”

We finish our burgers in silence, and I clean up the wrappers. After a while, Howie breaks the silence. “How’re you doing, Lina?”

I huff. “I feel like I am mentally and emotionally hitting a brick wall.”

He scratches his beard. “You know, sometimes walls are there to lean on and rest for a bit.”

---

After hanging out with Howie a bit longer, I take his advice and call it an early night. Maybe I can do some job hunting online before going to bed.

I unlock the door to our apartment and step inside. Wednesdays are Happy Hour nights at Roberto’s usual bar, so I’ll have a quiet house until Chiara comes back from Monica’s.

I head to the kitchen and start rifling through the cupboards. Even though I’ve already had a burger with Howie, the stress of losing my job is making my emotions go haywire. I need some comfort food to help me cope.

Healthy? Nah. Effective? Abso-fucking-lutely.

When I turn around with a loaf of bread in my hands, I see Roberto standing in the kitchen doorway.

*Fuck.*

He’s dressed in a grubby, yellow-stained white tank top and dirty sweatpants, clutching a half-empty bottle of vodka. I can practically smell the stench from here.

“What the hell are you doing here?” he slurs at me.

“I—” I start, trying to put some distance between us, but he follows.

“Again, no money! We have a problem, pig?”

“There was an issue at work, but I promise I’ll get you the money soon. I—” I try to explain, but he cuts me off by slamming his palm onto the kitchen counter.

“I don’t care what problems you’ve got. You’re giving me my money now,” Roberto demands, his body swaying slightly.

I don’t have anything to give him. Every penny I have is accounted for. I prepare myself for what’s bound to happen next, retreating into the safe corner of my mind where I always hide when he reduces me to a victim.

Keeping my outward calm, I say, “I don’t have your money.”

The next moment, an unbearable pain shoots through my left shoulder, followed by a sharp pain in my temple before I feel something warm trickle down the side of my face. In shock, I look at Roberto, who is staring at what’s left of the vodka bottle. He’s only holding the neck. The rest is scattered in shards around us on the floor.

“You’re lucky I didn’t aim for your head like I wanted to. I want my money. I don’t care how you get it,” he growls and drops the bottleneck, which shatters into a thousand pieces. “And get me another bottle of vodka, dammit!” Then he stomps to the living room, where the television flicks on.

I’m in shock, feeling my pulse throb in my shoulder and temple. With trembling fingers, I gingerly touch the tender area of my temple, feeling the wetness of blood and the raised skin. The sharp sting that follows makes me wince, drawing a pained breath.

*Fuck.*

Avoiding the shards of glass, I make my way to the bathroom. When I catch my reflection in the mirror, I see a small piece of glass lodged in my temple. Blood trickles down the side of my face, staining my collar.

*At least it was vodka. That shit is sterilizing, right?*

I look closer, and a cold chill runs down my spine at the sight. It's a small piece, but it's embedded pretty deep. I take a shaky breath, my mind racing.

*I need to get it out.*

I open the medicine cabinet, searching for the small first-aid kit I know is in there. I take a pair of tweezers from the kit and quickly clean them by running them under hot water.

Staring at my reflection in the mirror, I carefully position the tweezers and try to minimize the shaking of my hand. I take another deep breath. Then, with one quick, firm pull, I tug the shard free. A sudden gush of blood follows, and I hiss at the sharp pain. I quickly press a piece of gauze to the wound, feeling the warmth of my own blood seeping through.

After a moment, the bleeding slows. I dampen a washcloth with cool water and gently wipe away the blood from my face, being careful not to disturb the wound. Once clean, I apply antiseptic to the cut, wincing at the sting, and place a bandage over it. Exhausted and shaken, I slide down to sit on the bathroom floor, leaning my back against the door, where I take a moment to breathe.

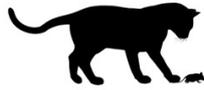
Once I'm a bit more settled, I look at my shoulder. My shirt is damp from the spilled vodka, but thankfully, the skin beneath it is just red. There are no cuts. I'm hoping it will only be a bad bruise.

Now that the first wave of pain has passed, it doesn't seem bad enough to need medical attention. It will be sore for a few days, but that's nothing new.

Getting up, I take one last look in the mirror. "Just two more years," I whisper to my reflection.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

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### Clay

“Sometimes I hate this job,” I admit to Josh as we enter the NYPD headquarters.

We just finished a call involving potential domestic abuse. A neighbor had reported screams and loud crashes from the apartment above. When we checked it out, the husband claimed everything was fine, that it was just the television making noise. We asked to see the wife, but her English wasn't great. Her eyes were red-rimmed as though she'd been crying recently, but she said she was okay. There was nothing more we could do, even though I had a gut feeling the neighbor was right about what he heard.

*Why do they always have to lie? We just want to help.*

“Same,” Josh agrees, leading the way through the headquarters' labyrinth to Sophia's lab.

I push the door open to find Sophia perched on her desk, with Carolina standing over her shoulder, peering at her computer screen.

“Hello, ladies,” I greet them, pretending to tip an invisible hat in their direction.

A smile spreads across Sophia's face while Carolina simply gives me a disinterested glance.

“We're on a break and starving. Fancy a trip to the cafeteria with us?” Josh asks. Sophia rolls her neck, loosening up a bit, then glances at her wristwatch.

“Wow, it’s already five! What do you think, Carolina? Hungry?” she asks.

“No, sorry. I’ve got plans later on,” Carolina says.

“Got a hot date?” I ask, causing her gaze to lock onto mine. Yet, she offers no answer, simply staring back at me with her signature look of indifference. Silent treatment is one of my weak spots, and it seems she’s figured that out already. She saunters over to her desk, and I follow, positioning myself in front of her. “You can spill the beans, Karen,” I say. “We could meet later for some tea, and you can fill me in on the details. Share how charming he was or how he gallantly held the door open for you. You know, all the usual chatter you girly girls love to do post-date.”

She turns to face me, and a gash on her temple comes into view.

*What the fuck?*

Instinctively, I reach out my hand to touch it, but she’s quick. Her hand shoots up, intercepting my wrist before I can reach her. Just as swiftly, she releases her grip and lets go of me again.

“Don’t touch me,” she warns.

“What happened there?” I ask, noting the depth of the cut.

“Oh, look, I found your nose. It was in my business,” Carolina quips as she rummages through her backpack on the desk, packing her belongings.

“It comes with the job,” I reply, not ready to let it go. “Tell me what happened.”

*Is she trying to protect someone at her own expense?* My mind races with possibilities, and none of them are good.

“It’s just a cut, relax. No need to bring out your hero complex.” She rolls her eyes before slinging her backpack over her shoulder.

I notice a slight wince cross her face when the weight of her bag lands.

Seeing her in pain, I step closer and soften my voice. “You can talk to me. When something’s wrong, or you’re in any trouble. I am here, okay? We all are.”

Her golden gaze locks with mine for a few seconds before she turns her head and asks Sophia, “Is it all right if I head out now when you leave?”

“Sure,” Sophia agrees, rising to her feet. “I’m starving. Let’s go.”

Sophia and Carolina take the lead, with Josh gallantly opening the door for them. As we navigate the corridors, I quicken my pace to fall into step with Carolina. “So, how about you telling me all the details of that fancy date at least?”

“How about no?” she flatly responds.

“Oh, so it is a date?” I tease, raising my eyebrows suggestively.

She merely rolls her eyes. “Sure. A super-hot one. He’s going to chauffeur me around the city in his Lamborghini.”

I can’t help but smirk at her response. “Sounds like a real catch.”

As we approach the hallway to the cafeteria, we pause, but Carolina just continues walking, waving a dismissive hand over her head.

Sophia chuckles. “She is something else. I love her.”

We navigate our way to the cafeteria, each grabbing something to eat before settling in at our regular spot.

“So, how’s it working together? Is she as good of a fit as you thought?” Josh asks his sister just before he dips into his country fries.

I sigh inwardly. I’d tell Josh to include some veggies in his meals, but he never listens. As I start on my cauliflower, I grudgingly admit that his plate looks better.

“Absolutely, she’s got a solid work ethic. For a student, she’s exceptionally ahead. She’s quick on her feet and keeps

things tidy. Plus, she's mostly quiet. I enjoy working with her," Sophia says.

"Hmm..." I murmur. "So, she doesn't toss any sarcastic remarks or complaints your way?"

Sophia laughs. "Well, I'm kind to her. Maybe you should give it a try."

"I am nice to her! But it's like with Margaret. You're just the grump whisperer."

At that, Josh laughs, nearly choking on a fry.

Sophia pats his back, and after he recovers from his coughing fit, she says, "Maybe it's all about understanding people, you know? Everyone has their own way."

"Yeah, maybe," I reply, not entirely convinced. I finish off the last bite of my cauliflower. "Did she tell you what happened? How did she get the cut on her temple?"

"No, and I did not ask. It is not my business." Sophia says, narrowing her eyes. "And until she comes to you to talk about it, it's not yours either."

"Maybe it's nothing. I think the whole domestic violence case we just had is messing with your head, Clay," Josh says.

I nod. It's possible that the case we just left is messing with my judgment, but something about this cut is not sitting right with me. I've seen too many cases, too many victims, and I'm almost certain Carolina is hiding something.

*If it was nothing, wouldn't she just have said what happened and not been so elusive? And how can I try to help her without her shutting me out entirely?*

"Do you have any plans for your birthday?" Josh asks Sophia, steering the conversation in a new direction.

"It's still a bit away," she says.

"True, but if you're thinking of something big, I'd like to know ahead of time so I can make arrangements," he pushes.

Sophia chuckles. "You don't have to worry about organizing anything. We could just have a small house party

like we did last year. However, this time, I'd prefer to have it on your side of the house. Your kitchen is bigger, and it got a bit crowded last time, even though there weren't many people."

I nod. "Absolutely! We can have the food set up on our side, and we'll open the doors to the garden so people can walk freely between our halves, and it won't feel too crowded. If it's not too cold, we could even hang out in the garden for a while."

"Oh, it's definitely going to be cold," Josh says. "But maybe we could bring out the fire pods again. They kept us warm on New Year's Eve so we could hang out outside for a bit."

"Right," I agree, grinning. "This is going to be good! I'm ready to get a little drunk."

Sophia chuckles. "Knowing you, you'll probably eat all the food before making your way upstairs, and then we won't see you for the rest of the night."

I shrug. "I know how to party."

---

## **Carolina**

"That looks cozy," I observe as I place Howie's belongings, which I'd been carrying, on the bed assigned to him by Gloria.

"Right?" Gloria beams. "It's a nice bed, and being in the back, it's much quieter."

Howie sits on the edge and pushes his hands down into the mattress. "It's soft."

"Yes, we got new ones a few months ago. They are very comfortable," Gloria shares.

An employee approaches us and asks Gloria some questions, so I turn to Howie. "What you wanted to say is that it is too soft, right?"

He nods. "I'm used to concrete."

I lift the linen and place the cardboard signs he wrote on to beg on the street underneath them, ensuring the entire mattress is covered before putting the linen back in place.

I press my hand on the surface and look at him triumphantly. "Feels like our spot."

Howie sits back down and lies on the bed, shifting around a bit before sitting back up and giving me a smile.

Gloria finishes her conversation and turns back to us. "Are we happy?"

Howie nods, and I smile at her. "More than happy. Thank you so much."

And it's true. Howie finally came to terms with it and accepted he will be staying here, lifting a weight off my shoulders.

"I'll let you get settled. You know where to find me if you need anything. Dinner will be ready in thirty minutes," she says before turning and leaving us alone.

"It seems like our burger dates will have to wait until spring, but it's good to know that you'll be getting more balanced meals now," I say.

"Don't you dare talk down on what you do for me daily, kid. I'm not sure I would still be here if it weren't for you," he says, his piercing blue eyes meeting mine as he reaches for my hand and gives it a pat. "You know where to find me when you need me," he continues. "Or when you just want to talk. Don't be a stranger for the next couple of months."

"Believe me, I'll be here so many times you'll wish you could get a break from me." I smile.

But he doesn't laugh. "Never."

My heart aches a little. I will definitely visit him, but I can't just barge in here in the middle of the night. If I find a new job, the opportunities to see him will be even less.

“See you around, Howie. Behave,” I tease, taking a step back.

He lies down on the bed but points a finger in the air. “Adult. See you around, kid.”

As I walk out of the shelter, I observe the people around me, noticing that many have a vacant look in their eyes—a look I recognize all too well from my own reflection. I can’t help but think back to the early days after my parents passed away.

*The homeless man named Howard, whom I’ve sat beside and shared burgers with over the past week, is staring at me from the side. I try to ignore him, taking deep breaths. But when I can’t take it anymore, I turn to face him, lifting my gaze to meet his, and ask with a frown, “What?”*

*“Nothing,” he replies, shaking his head.*

*I bite my lip. We haven’t really spoken much these past few nights. He told me his name, thanked me for the burgers, and wished me goodnight when I left. It was simple, and I liked it that way. I just need a place to unwind. The thought of eating my burger alone after a grueling shift at that dreadful bar makes my heart even heavier than it already is.*

I’m always alone lately, even when amidst a crowd.

*With him, it feels like he is sitting with me in the darkness without a dawn.*

*He continues to watch me, so I look down at my hands and start taking deep breaths again.*

*“What happened?” he asks, tipping his head toward me.*

*“What should’ve happened?” I reply with a shrug.*

*“Your soul feels even heavier than usual,” he observes, turning his gaze forward again.*

*I snort. “And here I was thinking my body was the part that needed to lose some weight.”*

*He looks at me again, one eyebrow raised, unimpressed. I sigh.*

Is it right for me to unload my issues on a homeless man?

*“Some guy at school started bullying me,” I whisper.*

*Martin Del Moro was never nice, but when his family visited mine, he was tolerable, and he’d leave me alone at school. Now, with my parents having passed away just a couple weeks ago and a fallout between his father and my uncle, he seems to have found a new hobby of kicking a girl who’s already on the floor.*

*“What does he say?” Howard inquires.*

*“A lot,” I shrug, not wanting to detail the vile things Martin throws at me.*

*“And what do you say in return?” he pushes.*

*“Nothing,” I mumble, trying to deflect.*

*“Why?” he questions, tilting his head.*

*“Because I was taught to be nice, and I don’t want to stoop to his level,” I say, although part of me wishes I could give him a taste of his own medicine.*

*“There is a time to be nice and a time to stand your fucking ground,” Howard says before turning and leaning his back against the concrete wall again. “Expect the bullshit, but never accept it, kid.”*

---

The push to find a new job has taken priority. Without knowing what my pay from the internship will be, I have to find something.

It’s nearly midnight when I arrive at the last bar in the neighborhood. I’ve walked from bar to bar tonight, asking if they are hiring, but none have an open position. And the financial pressure is almost suffocating.

Tomorrow is my birthday, and my tattoo appointment is right after my shift at the NYPD. Yet again, I find myself questioning whether I should go through with it, but I know I wouldn't be able to forgive myself if I put someone else in a bind.

Afterward, I'll have to walk and visit the bars farther away. I had hoped to find something near our apartment so I wouldn't have to walk too far and lose even more sleep from my schedule, but it seems that isn't in the cards.

I push open the door to the bar. It's not overly crowded. Patrons are sitting around tables, sipping on their beers. This is the bar Roberto frequents, so I'm definitely not here to ask for work.

*I've come for a different reason.*

I walk up to the bar where Bernie is wiping glasses with a cloth. He looks up from his task, offering a smile. "Hey, short stack. How are you? What are you doing here?" Bernie puts down the glass and cloth, leaning on the counter.

He is a middle-aged man with a round beer belly and a receding hairline, but he's one of the nicest guys around.

"Hey, Bernie. I'm fine, thank you. How about you? How's Elisabeth and the kids?" I ask.

"Great, thanks. Simon just finished middle school. Smart kid. And Willa has started taking guitar lessons," he says.

"That sounds lovely. Please say hi to them for me," I say.

"Sure, I will. But that's not why you're here," he states, tilting his head while looking at me.

"I'm here because of Roberto," I admit, cringing a bit.

"Ah, what about him?" Bernie asks.

"I'm a bit short on money at the moment since I lost my job, but I'm already searching for a new one and will get back on track—" I start explaining, but Bernie interrupts me.

"Carolina, don't worry. He can drink on the tab. You can come pay me whenever the situation is back to normal,"

Bernie assures me.

“You would do that?” I ask, my heart pounding in my chest. The relief I feel is like a stone dropping off my shoulders.

“I haven’t forgotten that you looked after Simon while we were in the hospital with Willa. The neighborhood looks out for each other. And I know I can count on your word,” he says.

I try my best to maintain my composure, but tears well up in my eyes. “Thank you,” I whisper, locking eyes with him and trying to convey everything I want to say through that gaze.

Afraid my emotions will get the better of me, I turn and walk out of the bar.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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### **Carolina**

My shoulder aches under the weight of my backpack, but it's not the only thing hurting right now as I step out of the subway station and head to NYPD headquarters.

I'm twenty-two today, but no one remembered. Not that I expected anyone to, but even Chiara didn't say anything to me today.

*That stung.*

We had breakfast together like every morning, and she simply forgot. I try not to take it personally. She's a teenager with other stuff on her mind.

*Everything I do is for her...*

*... and she can't even...*

I take a deep breath, and I push the thought aside.

*I can't dwell on that.*

Getting through classes was hard enough, and I still have my internship now. But after that, I've got my tattoo appointment. I smile to myself. At least that's something no one can take away from me.

It's only my fifth day here, but to my surprise, I already know the way to Sophia's office and quickly join her in running the tests she is doing.

A couple hours in, we get a result that surprises me.

“See, this is what I suspected,” she says. “It’s definitely not your everyday drug.”

“I’ve never seen anything like this before,” I say.

“Neither have I, but finding out what this is all about is going to be so much fun.” She grins at me, and I can’t help but grin back. “Did you just smile at me?” She laughs. “Oh wow.”

“I do smile... sometimes,” I mutter.

“Sure, I just haven’t seen it before. But Mr. Sexy Toxicology is making all the STEM girls smile.” She winks at me.

“Okay, that was just weird,” I say, trying to suppress a laugh.

“And that surprises who?” she giggles.

“Did you have too much tea today, Sophia?” I ask, only half serious.

“I don’t think there’s such a thing as too much when it comes to tea,” she says.

We continue our testing, and an hour later, Josh and Clay enter the office.

“Hey, you two,” Josh greets us with a smile. “Working hard?”

Clay walks over to my desk, standing behind me and peering over my shoulder at my screen.

“Ooh... this looks cool. What are you working on?” he asks, leaning in so his head is next to mine.

“I neither have the time nor the crayons to explain it to you,” I say.

He laughs, clutching his heart and giving me an exaggerated, pained expression. “That was cold, Karen.”

Any other day, my mask would remain firmly in place, but with my emotions all over the place, I can’t save myself from the smirk that forms.

“Oh my God,” Clay says, leaning into my space again. “Did you just smile at me? Josh, I can die in peace now. Karen just smiled at me,” he declares.

Sophia says, “It’s the day, not you.”

My head turns so fast in her direction. “What do you mean?”

“You smiled at me earlier too. It’s not him. It’s the day. Today is not a good day for your resting bitch face,” she says.

I huff. “I don’t have a resting bitch face. I’m just a bitch that needs some rest,” I snark, starting to massage my temple but wincing as I touch the cut.

*I had forgotten about it.*

Clay looks at me critically while Josh chuckles. “I can’t even tell if you’re trying to be funny or not.” I shoot him a glare. “Maybe not,” he grins.

“Do you need to get that checked?” Clay asks, pointing at my temple.

“Not that again, Clay. It’s nothing. Let it go.” I sigh.

“You have a headache and a cut. If the cut comes from a hit on your head, it could be a mild concussion,” he ponders.

“You wouldn’t know the difference between a headache and an idea.” I huff, hoping to deflect his watchful stare.

“Ready to go eat?” Josh asks Sophia, effectively defusing our bickering. But when she nods, he turns his gaze back to me, raising an eyebrow.

“Can’t. I have—” I begin before being interrupted.

“Another hot date today? By the way, how was the one yesterday?” Clay asks, looking amused. “You still owe me all the tea.”

“Yes, another hot date. And the one yesterday ended with him in bed, so I’d say it worked out exactly as planned,” I quip, my tone dry.

Clay's eyes widen in surprise. "Damn, I don't know if you're fucking with me."

"Sounds like a 'you' problem," I say. I swiftly pack my backpack and stand. "I have to go to make it in time."

"Have a nice weekend," Sophia says.

---

The door dings as I enter Darkened Dermis, and my pulse races. Xander stands behind the register, bent over his tablet, looking like the Viking god he is. He's dressed in all black, but this time, there is no beanie, and I can see his long, dark blond hair swiped up into a man bun.

My breath catches when he looks up, and his gray eyes meet mine. "Hey, Carolina. Good to see you," he says, straightening and emphasizing our dramatic height difference.

"Hey," I say, trying to contain the nerves threatening to shake me.

He hands his tablet to me and says, "Please fill out this form real quick before we get started."

I do so, the task helping me calm down a bit. By the time I'm done, my hand is less shaky than when I started.

"Ready?" he asks when I hand the tablet back to him, and I nod.

He gestures for me to come around the register and leads me to the back, where the tattoo stool is located. On a short metal table, various sizes of stencils of my tattoo design are laid out.

I look them over, then back up at Xander, my eyes wide. "Oh my God," I say, looking back down again. "It's amazing. Wow."

"Happy you like it. Let me see which size fits best," he says, and I pull up my sleeve, baring my forearm. He holds the different sizes against the designated spot before deciding on one.

Xander puts the design just below the fold of my arm. “That will look pretty good,” he remarks as he removes the paper. “Take a look in the mirror. I think the placement is perfect, but we can adjust it if you disagree.”

I stand in front of the mirror and examine my arm. It’s exactly how I imagined it, and I nod. “It’s perfect.”

He points to the tattoo chair, and I sit, struggling a bit because it’s so high.

He prepares the black ink and the tattoo needle. “Your first tattoo?” I nod. “It’s interesting. I’ve tattooed a few of these before, but never with this wording.”

I gaze into his beautiful, big eyes and ask, “What do you mean?”

“Usually, people want it to say, ‘*Memento Mori.*’”

I smile. “Do you know what it means?”

He pulls off his black gloves and gets fresh ones from the table beside him. “*Memento Mori*, ‘Remember that you must die.’”

I nod. “My dad always told my sister and me that. He said we should appreciate the good things in life because our time here is limited.”

Xander tests the tattoo machine by pressing the pedal a few times, the buzzing sound making me shiver.

“So why didn’t you choose that phrase?”

My heart aches, and I speak softly, gazing down at the stencil on my arm. “The dead crow stands for that part, but after my dad lectured us, my mother always said that ‘*Memento Vivere*’ is much more important.”

He looks up at me, raising an eyebrow.

“Remember to live,” I whisper.

His expression softens, and his entire face seems to change. “I actually prefer your version more,” he says, moving his chair closer to me.

He reaches for my arm, but I'm so lost in my thoughts that I instinctively flinch away from his touch.

His eyebrows furrow once more. "May I?" he asks.

I hastily nod and offer my arm to him. "Of course. I'm sorry."

He dips the needle into the ink and prepares to start the tattoo. "I'll make a quick line so you can get a sense of how it feels and what to expect. If it becomes too painful, please let me know before you start twitching." His eyebrows raise, and if he was smiling, I would think he's teasing me, but his serious demeanor makes it hard to tell.

So, I just nod. "Okay."

The tattoo machine begins to buzz, and he lowers the needle onto my skin. It stings a bit, but it's not very painful. I've endured much worse. I take a deep breath.

*Pain won't be an issue.*

"You okay?" he asks, wiping my forearm with a cloth and looking up at me.

"Piece of cake," I say honestly.

I notice a slight upward curl on the left side of his mouth.

After two hours of him working and me quietly watching, he finishes. No words were exchanged except for him occasionally asking if I was doing okay.

He wipes the fresh ink with a cloth, applying a jelly-like substance using a wooden stick. "Go take a look in the mirror before we wrap it up," he directs, and I rise from the chair.

As my feet touch the floor, I wobble a bit from sitting for so long. He quickly grabs my upper arm to steady me.

"Easy, there," he says, his large hands making my not-so-small arm appear tiny.

"Thanks," I say, gently pulling away from his grasp. I stand in front of the mirror, and a smile spreads across my face. "It's perfect," I whisper. Tears well up in my eyes,

causing my vision to blur slightly. I take a deep breath and turn to him. “Thank you so much. I absolutely love it.”

He nods and begins to retrieve Saran Wrap and tape to wrap my arm when the door to the shop opens with a ding.

I’m admiring my new tattoo in the mirror when a deep voice interrupts my thoughts. “You done, babe? Sorry, I’m a bit early.”

I freeze. *I recognize that voice.* I turn around and find Clay at the reception desk. Xander sets down his tools and walks over to him, pulling him into a passionate kiss. My mind feels like it’s about to explode.

The odds of Clay being with my tattoo artist are beyond belief, and witnessing those two tall, muscular, tattooed, hot men kissing is undeniably the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen. I can’t help but question my own sexuality.

I need to stop staring.

“We’re just finishing up. I’ll take some pictures, wrap her up, and then we can leave,” Xander says as he returns to the table, and I stand beside him.

I gaze up at Clay and see the moment it hits him. “Hey, Karen,” he smirks.

I don’t say anything, looking back down at my arm.

“Her name is Carolina,” Xander grumbles while taking pictures of my arm, holding it outstretched, his grip on my wrist gentle.

“Right,” Clay says, and when I glance at him, he grins without a hint of shame or remorse.

I don’t react, my attention back on Xander, who is now wrapping Saran Wrap around my arm. Clay leans over the counter, trying to catch a glimpse.

Xander finishes taping everything and releases his grip on my wrist, allowing me to pull down the sleeve of my sweater to cover the tattoo.

“Did you get something cool?” Clay asks, his curiosity evident.

“The goal wasn’t for it to be cool,” I say flatly, reaching for my backpack.

Looking back up, I notice Xander smiling to himself.

This man is going to kill me if he ever happens to smile at me.

I walk up to the register, and Xander follows suit, ringing me up and giving me some aftercare cream and instructions on taking care of my new tattoo.

“Thank you again, I love it. Maybe I’ll see you again,” I say, turning to leave.

Clay says happily, “See you, Karen.”

I don’t even turn around while I retort in a bored tone, “Bye, *Clark*,” and open the door, hearing him chuckle.

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## **Xander**

“Why were you so rude to her? And how do you even know her?” I ask Clay, his treatment of Carolina does not sit well with me.

She looked so vulnerable, yet there was a strength in her eyes. A resilience. That’s probably why I felt an immediate need to protect her, even from Clay’s banter. The way she presented herself felt so familiar, hauntingly so.

*Why did her pain feel so palpable?*

I can’t remember the last person to tug at my soul the way she did.

He grins. “Nah... I wasn’t being rude. She knows I’m just joking around.” My brows furrow, but I remain silent, continuing to look at him. “Seriously, babe, I like her. She’s so fucking unfazed, it’s iconic. You should see her at work.”

*But is she truly unfazed?*

Or has she perfected the art of hiding behind a wall like I had to?

There was a weight about her, something that said she'd been through a lot and, perhaps, was still going through it. That same weight used to look back at me when I'd catch my reflection during the darkest times in my life. Times when my father's oppressive presence threatened to swallow me whole. The look in her eyes mirrored the look I once held—a look that spoke of trauma, fear, and the desperate attempts to keep going despite it all.

I tilt my head. “At work?”

He takes my hand in his, linking our fingers. “You remember the girl I was teasing Josh about earlier this week? The cute but fiery gothic one?”

*Fiery? Or just trying to fight off the darkness?*

My eyes widen in realization. “That's her?”

Clay nods. “Yep.”

I let out a sigh. “She's not a ‘goth girl’ just because she dresses in all black.”

The black might be her shield against the world. I remember using anger as mine.

He smirks. “True, maybe she's more of a black cat.”

“Well, you might be onto something there.” I glance at the photos on my phone, and Clay lets go of my hand to place his arm around my waist and peer at the screen with me.

“Damn, that's fucking cool,” he says. “Definitely one of your best pieces so far.”

I nod, proud of it myself. Her tattoo request was truly special, and I thoroughly enjoyed the process of bringing it to life. That's why I agreed to do it today, after hours, even though I'm booked out months in advance.

“You should have seen the sketch she made to show me her idea. It was impressive. She is an artist herself.”

To say I was surprised to see that sketch is an understatement.

“You should post it on your socials,” he says.

“Let me check if she marked the permission checkbox on the form,” I say, wanting to ensure she gave consent before I share her tattoo online.

As I scan over the form she filled out earlier on my tablet, I see that she did, in fact, give me permission. I momentarily skip over her personal details and suddenly freeze. “What is the date today?” I ask, turning to Clay.

“November twenty-sixth. Why?” I blink at the date she wrote down.

“It’s her birthday.” I scratch my beard.

He hums thoughtfully. “Getting a tattoo on your birthday seems like a nice idea. How old did she turn?”

“Twenty-two.”

“Makes sense. She’s in her last year of college,” he notes while I set my tablet aside.

“I would have guessed she was older. She’s got this mature, calm vibe.”

The kind of maturity you only gain from enduring hardships. And I should know.

*I’ve lived it.*

Clay huffs a laugh. “Did you even talk to her? She’s a mean little spitfire.”

*But everyone has a breaking point.*

I reach over, catching hold of Clay’s neck and massaging it. He leans into my touch and groans. “What are you talking about? She seemed nice, even a bit sad and shy.”

*More like wounded and guarded.*

He chokes on the air, and his eyes pop open. “Shy? Are we talking about the same person?”

I pull his head back, forcing him to look up at me. Leaning in, I whisper into his ear, “Maybe she’s just nice to those who are nice to her in return,” I add, quickly nibbling on his earlobe.

“I’m always nice,” Clay murmurs, and I chuckle before biting down a little harder. He hisses in surprise.

“No, you’re a cheeky, sarcastic bastard, and that’s why I love you,” I tell him before releasing him. “But try to be a bit nicer to her. She’s had enough rough times, it seems.”

The way she talked about her parents? *She lost them for sure.*

But who is tormenting her now? And can I, no, *should* I, do something about it?

I’m reminded of the moments when I wished for someone, anyone, to just notice. To offer a hand, a shoulder, a kind word.

Perhaps we can be that for her, even if our paths have only just crossed.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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### **Carolina**

“Lina?” Chiara’s soft voice reaches me as she enters our bedroom.

I’m sitting on the edge of the bed, my head buried in my hands, contemplating what the hell I’m going to do now.

“*Si, piccola*, what’s up?” I look up at her, and she looks slightly embarrassed.

“I need a new phone,” she says.

“A new phone?” I furrow my brow at her. “What happened to yours?”

“It has a huge crack on the screen, and I can’t text properly like this,” she states, handing it to me.

Indeed, there’s a big, noticeable crack running through the middle of the screen, although it still functions.

“How did that happen?” I ask.

“I accidentally dropped it.” She shrugs.

*Of course.* Nonchalantly tossing away a few hundred dollars.

We both have older, secondhand smartphone models, but they’re still our most valuable possessions, besides the laptop I need for college—a luxury I have to work hard for every day.

“I can’t afford to buy you a new one right now. You’ll have to make do with what you have,” I say.

“But I can’t text properly like this, and Leo is waiting for a response. He’ll think I’m not interested anymore if I don’t reply!” she says, agitated.

“Leo? Who’s Leo?” I stare at her critically.

“If you didn’t work all the time and took more interest in my life, you would know that Leo is going to be my boyfriend soon.” She huffs.

*Wait a second, boyfriend?*

“Oh, is he now? Who is he? A classmate?” I try to sound interested, not panicked, even though my heart rate jumps.

“No, he’s older.” She shrugs again.

I stand, feeling the need to level the playing field. It’s hard enough that she looks down on me when we’re both standing, but I don’t have to give her the advantage while sitting.

“How much older?” I ask, my tone turning icy.

“He’s seventeen, and he’s already working as a mechanic part-time. I can ask him if he can buy me a new phone.”

My blood pressure is rising. “*Sei pazzo?*” <Are you crazy? > I ask her, “We are *not* going to let men pay for our stuff so they can have leverage over us. If you need something, I’ll provide it for you. You *never* ask a man for anything, got it?”

She tilts her head, looking annoyed. “But you just said you don’t have the money right now.”

I take out my phone from my pocket and backup our phones before placing them on the bed and swapping our SIM cards. I hand her my phone and take her broken one.

“Here. Now, tell me more about this Leo guy. What do you mean he’s going to be your boyfriend soon?”

She doesn’t respond for a moment because she’s busy setting up her new phone and texting Leo back.

“It means he loves me, and I love him. He’ll soon ask me to be exclusive,” she says matter-of-factly.

I furrow my brow. “Do you even know what that means?”

“Of course, I know, I’m not a damn baby anymore, Lina, and if you actually talked to me, you would know,” she says sharply.

*Ouch, that one stung.*

“Okay, I see. Do we need to have ‘the talk’ again, or are you all set?” I ask, trying to keep my cool.

She rolls her eyes at me and heads back toward the door. “I’m going to spend the weekend at Monica’s,” she informs me before leaving me alone.

*Well, at least I don’t have to do that again.*

I imagine having the talk about birds and bees is hard enough as a parent. It’s even tougher as a sister with zero fucking experience of my own, though.

When I was fourteen, I struggled with bad acne, and Mama took me to the gynecologist to get on birth control to help with the breakouts. We had ‘the talk’ then.

The birth control did help, and I still take it for that reason. At one point, I wanted to stop taking them because they’re an extra expense on my list, and let’s be honest, I don’t need the pills for what they are intended for, but as soon as I stopped, my acne came back with a vengeance. I’ll gladly work an extra shift each month if it means I don’t have to walk around with a face full of craters.

Then, when Chiara went through the same problems about six months ago, I did what our mother did with me.

I swear, I’m not going to have children. Navigating Chiara through her teenage years is challenging enough. I don’t need to go through all of that again.

I look at my new phone and attempt to tap on it. It still works, but she’s right. I can’t text properly since the letters in the middle of the phone are unresponsive. Looks like I’ll have to stick to making phone calls or sending emojis.

Not that anyone besides Chiara messages me anyway.

A few hours later, I find myself sitting at my laptop, searching the web for a new job again. But either the hours

don't align with my schedule, or the pay is terrible.

"Fuck," I mutter into the empty room, frustration creeping in.

Suddenly, my phone rings. It's an unknown number, but I filled out some applications, so I answer, "Hello?"

"Where the fuck are you?" a familiar voice demands.

"Donny?" I furrow my brows.

"The bar is packed like crazy. Get your ass over here, you're already late for your shift," he says.

"So, I'm not fired anymore?" I ask, dumbfounded.

"I told you you're late for your shift," he replies and hangs up.

Oh *Dio*.

*Thank fuck.* A genuine laugh escapes me as I glance up at the ceiling for a moment, taking a deep breath.

I get ready in record time and make my way to the bar. It's freezing outside, and a shiver runs through me as I close the bar's back door and hang my jacket in the still-empty locker. Only my apron is there, so I tie it around my waist.

Entering the kitchen, I nod to Lennard and Matteo, who both grin and nod back. I push open the door to the bar and spot Cindy struggling to fill some beer glasses. She's shaking, causing beer to spill everywhere while Donny reprimands her.

I take the glass out of Cindy's hand, gently nudging her to the side with my hip, and ask, "Order?"

"Three beers, table six," Cindy whispers near my ear.

I quickly prepare the beers and place them on a tray, then make my way over to the table with a friendly smile.

I return behind the bar, swiftly wiping the sticky surface with a cloth and rearranging everything back into its proper place.

Cindy has made a mess of everything, but it feels damn good to be back. I still despise this job, but knowing I can pay

next month's rent and cover my other expenses makes the whole fucking ordeal worth it.

Donny walks over to me, lightly tapping the surface of the bar next to me. I glance up at him, and he says, "Don't be late again tomorrow." His face carries a stern expression, yet I detect a hint of amusement in his eyes.

"Wouldn't dream of it," I respond, smirking slightly.

He nods and heads into the kitchen.

As soon as Donny is out of sight, Cindy rushes over to me and envelops me in a hug. "God, never leave me alone here again," she whispers, and when she releases me, I notice tears in her eyes.

I don't particularly like Cindy, but even I'm not heartless enough to lack sympathy for her when she's such a mess. "Are you okay?"

"I am now that I have my BFF back." She pulls me into a quick hug before heading toward a table that requires attention.

Wait, am I tripping? Did she just call me her BFF? And is she actually working the tables right now?

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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### Clay

“You need to start eating healthier, man,” I tell Josh as he chomps down on a cheeseburger in the passenger seat.

It’s Saturday evening, and we’re on shift again, parked in front of a fast-food restaurant that Josh enjoys in the Bronx.

“Sure, tomorrow,” he says, speaking with a mouthful, and I let out an exasperated sigh at his lack of concern.

The evening has been quiet, with us mostly driving around and observing people having a good time on their night out.

My phone buzzes with a text from Xander.

Just finished everything up and about to settle on the couch, watching some Netflix. Hope your night is uneventful. Miss you.

Sometimes, I despise my job. I could be snuggled up on the couch with my boyfriend right now, but instead, I’m watching my best friend stuff his face, waiting to be called to a case.

I’d drive back home to you in a heartbeat for some Netflix and chill, babe. Miss you too.

Oh, yeah? How much Netflix and how much chill would be involved?

I'd say I wouldn't give a damn about what we watch since we wouldn't hear a thing over me moaning.

Fuck, love, now look what you've done.

My heart races, and my face flushes as a picture suddenly pops up in our text thread—Xander's massive, beautiful, heavily tattooed, and pierced cock tightly gripped in his fist, fully erect. I groan and let my head fall against the car seat, swiping my free hand over my face.

“God, you guys sexting again?” Josh asks, cleaning up the fast-food trash. “You should keep that stuff for home. I think I've seen your boner more than Xander has lately.”

I glance down at the noticeable bulge in my tight uniform pants and shift my hips, trying to adjust myself.

“Sorry, these late shifts are cockblocking me more and more,” I say.

“Mm-hmm... I get it. It sucks. I mean, I have no one waiting for me, but I still want to get a good night's sleep soon,” he says, suppressing a yawn.

“Didn't we discuss you getting back on dating apps?” I turn slightly to get a better look at him.

“Yeah, we did, but it's just not my thing. Either they're only after a quick hookup, or they want to marry me without even meeting in person,” he explains.

“Oh, poor handsome boy, having women lining up without even trying is such a drag,” I tease.

“It is. I'm twenty-six, and I'm done with playing around. I want something real, something like what you guys have,” he says, his gaze dropping to his fingers.

“We do have something real, but we're still not done playing around.” I laugh.

“When was the last time you guys brought a girl home? I haven't seen one around the house in a while,” he asks, looking back up at me.

Xander and I have been together since our early teenage years, and I've loved him since when we were just naïve kids who didn't fully grasp the concept of love. I simply knew he was mine, and I was his.

We are bisexual and occasionally enjoy sharing a woman between us. However, we've established clear rules, never with other men, and we only fuck others when we are both in the room. This arrangement works perfectly for us, allowing us to explore together while ensuring no one is left out or jealous.

"It's more challenging to find women for some morning fun," I say.

Josh laughs. "True."

Just then, the radio crackles to life, interrupting our conversation. "Attention all units in the vicinity of 1158 Rhineland Avenue. We have received multiple noise complaints regarding a house party at that location. Neighbors have reported excessive noise and disturbance. Can any unit in the area please respond and check out the situation, ensure the safety of the attendees, and remind them to keep the noise down? Over."

We're only a few blocks away, so I glance at Josh, and he grins, leaning forward to press the response button on the radio. "Dispatch, Unit forty-seven, we copy the noise complaint at Rhineland Avenue. We will respond and investigate the situation. Over."

"Fucking finally, something's happening around here. I thought I was going to need a nap soon," I say, starting the engine, and we speed off toward the house party.

As we drive through the streets, our patrol car lights flashing, the excitement builds. It's a much-needed break from the same old routine of our current shift.

When we finally reach the address, an explosion of colors and energy greets us. The house party is in full swing, with the music blaring and laughter echoing through the air.

Bringing the car to a stop, Josh and I exchange a knowing glance, gearing up to face the situation head-on. A cool rush of night air greets us as we get out of the car and approach the house.

Conversations momentarily taper off as the partygoers take notice of our arrival. I can't help but notice that many of them appear to be barely legal, clutching red cups and wearing somewhat nervous expressions.

*Why the fuck do these people party outside? It's November, for fuck's sake.*

But when I glance up at the house, I can see through the windows that it is packed. With authority in my voice, I address the crowd. "All right, folks, we've received noise complaints. We need everyone to keep the noise down and show respect for the neighbors. Let's keep the party going, but with a little more consideration, all right?"

The crowd responds with nods and murmurs of agreement, and the music gets turned down.

Glancing around, I notice a small group of boys and girls who appear particularly young, too young to be out on a Saturday night with alcohol in their hands. I turn to Josh, and we exchange a nod, silently agreeing to check on them.

The three guys from the group notice our approach and hastily bolt, abandoning their cups and making a quick escape. The two girls are left staring in disbelief, seemingly too shocked to follow suit.

Without wasting a moment, Josh and I position ourselves, each placing a hand on one of the girls' shoulders to prevent any misguided attempts to flee.

"Ladies," I address them with a reassuring smile. "May we see your IDs, please?"

Tears begin streaming down the taller girl's face, signaling we may have just stumbled upon a situation that will keep us occupied for the rest of the night. But when the smaller girl looks up at me, I am stunned.

Carolina's captivating cat eyes look back at me from a face that is not hers.

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## **Carolina**

A few hours have passed, and the bar has finally calmed down as the last patrons make their way out. My shift for the day is nearly over, and I made good tips today, but my head is pounding from the heat and the noise over hours.

Needing something for my headache, I head toward the lockers to get my backpack. Since I'm constantly on the go, I make sure to keep a little of everything I may need throughout the day.

I take out a Tylenol and gulp it without water, leaving my backpack behind the counter. The sooner I can clean up, the sooner I can go home. So I grab a cloth and head to a table, letting out a tired sigh.

Of course, Cindy promptly plops herself down on the spot I just cleaned. "I missed you," she says with a smile.

"Did you?" I respond, my tone edges irritated as I wipe the table.

"Yes, and I'm not the only one. Lennard asked about you, and Matteo wanted me to give him your number," she says, wiggling her eyebrows mischievously.

"Too bad you don't have it," I say.

"That's exactly what I told him. But I think you should give him a chance. He's into you," she pushes.

I let out an exasperated huff. "No one is into me."

"That's not true. Someone being into you is the whole reason you got into this mess," Cindy says, shrugging casually.

I shoot her a sharp glare, ready to retort, but my phone suddenly chimes, diverting my attention. I pick it out of my

pocket and glance at the screen, but I don't recognize the number.

"Hello?" I answer, my voice tinged with a hint of apprehension.

"Carolina Costa?" a woman asks in a neutral tone.

"Yes," I respond, glancing at the clock above the bar. It's nearly two in the morning. "How can I help you?"

Cindy furrows her brow, curious, but I simply shrug in response.

"It concerns your sister, Chiara Costa," she explains.

Panic immediately surges through my chest. "What happened?" I ask, trying to keep my voice steady but failing.

I drop the cloth and make my way toward the bar to grab my backpack.

"We've been trying to get a hold of Mr. Costa, but he's unreachable," the woman continues, and I cringe at the mention of my uncle. "We need you to come to the police station to pick up your sister, Ms. Costa."

My heart pounds in my chest as I quickly make my way toward the exit. "What happened? Is she okay?" I ask anxiously, my hand already on the door handle.

"She was found drinking in public. You can discuss the details with the officers who picked her up."

"Which station?" I ask, my mind racing with worry.

"NYPD Headquarters, miss," comes the response.

*Fuck.*

"On my way," I say, abruptly ending the call. "Cindy, can you please close up for me? It's an emergency."

"Sure, is everything all—" she starts to ask, but I'm already out the door, sprinting toward the nearest subway station.

Mama's words come rushing back to me. Would she still be proud if she knew that I failed to guide Chiara so much?

*“Sometimes, we have to push back our own feelings and wishes so the ones we love are cared for. But you are doing amazing, and I am so proud of you.”*

Once again, I’m sucked into the past.

*The room is bathed in the soft afternoon light, casting a warm glow on walls adorned with posters and drawings. I am sitting at my desk, engrossed in a drawing I’ve been working on for days, my brow furrowed in concentration, my tongue peeking out slightly as I carefully add to my masterpiece.*

*Chiara is playing on the floor behind me, her tiny hands busy with some blocks.*

*I realize I need a particular shade of blue and stand to get it from Mama’s desk. “Just a second, piccola,” I murmur to Chiara, heading out of the room.*

*When I come back into the room, Chiara is kneeling on my stool, holding a dark marker and drawing all over my paper.*

*“Chiara,” I exclaim, my voice rising in frustration. “Cosa hai fatto?” <What did you do?>*

*Chiara startles at my sudden outburst, looking up with wide, tear-filled eyes. “I... I help,” she stammers, her lower lip quivering.*

*My anger bubbles over. “You ruined it,” I yell.*

*Her face crumples, and she bursts into tears, her small body shaking with sobs.*

*Mama rushes into the room, concern evident on her face. “What happened?” she asks, quickly moving to lift Chiara from the stool to comfort her.*

*I am still fuming and holding up the ruined drawing to her. “She destroyed it, Mama!”*

*Our mother looks at the drawing, then back at me. “Topolina,” she begins gently, “I know you’re upset and that your drawings mean a lot to you. But remember, you are her*

*big sister. She is just a little girl. She does not understand the value of things just now.”*

*“But, Mama, it’s not fair!” I protest, tears forming in my own eyes. “I just wanted to make it perfect.”*

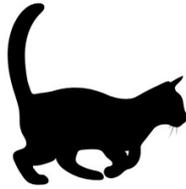
*She strokes over Chiara’s hair before she sets her down to pull me into a comforting embrace. “I know, my little mouse. And it’s okay to feel this way. But as the big sister, you also have a role to play. Chiara looks up to you, and she is still learning. We need to guide her together.”*

*I glance at Chiara, who is now looking remorseful. I take a deep breath, “I am sorry, piccola. Do you want to draw with me?”*

*Our mother smiles at me, kissing my cheek. “Brava, life isn’t always fair, topolina, but it’s how we react in those moments that truly defines us.”*

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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### **Josh**

We bring the girls back to headquarters and let the assistant call their parents. I can't stop staring at the smaller girl's eyes. They are so much like Carolina's. The hair color and surname fit too.

*Is she a cousin or something?*

The Italian community is big in New York, and 'Costa' occurs as frequently as 'Smith.' But those eyes are not an everyday sight.

A tall, middle-aged woman walks into the waiting room, and we nod to her as she gets to her daughter and starts berating her. "What were you thinking? I raised you better than this! This happens when you hang around that ghetto kid all the time." Then she turns to the one named Chiara and raises a finger at her. "Everything we did for you, and this is how you repay us? Influencing her to do such things!"

"Mom, it wasn't her idea," the blonde girl starts.

"I don't want to hear it, Monica!" the mother shouts, and she deflates. The woman straightens and walks over to us. "Officers," she starts. "I am very sorry for my daughter's behavior. But you will see it's her first ever slip, and it will not happen again." She throws her daughter a stern look. "I am sure we can manage the situation by paying a fee without writing her down."

"No one is going to write anyone down. Our main concern was ensuring the safety of your daughter and her friend, so we

brought them here. Unfortunately, we are required by the state to impose a fine as a legal penalty,” I explain.

I notice Chiara’s golden eyes widen in response.

“And how much would that fine be?” the mother asks.

“We will need to wait for her parents to arrive and then have a discussion with both of you, if you don’t mind,” I say.

She lets out a huff in response. “That means we’ll be waiting for a long time.”

Furrowing my brows, I’m about to ask what she means when Carolina rushes into the room, appearing frantic as she scans the area. Her hair is pulled back into a ponytail, but strands stick out around her face. Her beautiful face is red, and her lips have a blue sheen.

*Did she get here without a jacket?*

She’s dressed in her usual black jeans and a black Henley, but she also wears an apron around her waist.

Does she work at a restaurant on the weekends?

I check the clock, and it’s already after two.

“Chiara,” she exclaims as soon as she catches sight of her, moving swiftly to stand in front of her and gently framing her face with both hands.

Chiara is slightly taller and petite, but now that they stand face to face, their resemblance is uncanny. “You okay, *piccola? Sei ferito?*” <Are you hurt?>

Tears start to brim in Chiara’s eyes, and she lets out a choked sob. “I am so sorry.”

Carolina draws her into an embrace, gently patting her hair. “Shh... it’s okay... you’re okay.”

There is a huff of annoyance. “No wonder she does whatever she wants when you raise her like this!” Monica’s mother sneers.

Clay and I exchange a quick, puzzled look. *Raise?* Carolina is far too young to be her mother, right? But they

look so fucking alike.

She gently pulls back from Chiara, inspecting her face. With a soft stroke of her thumb, she removes a stray tear, then releases her and turns to face the other woman, standing protectively in front of Chiara. Her earlier panicked and fearful look has vanished, replaced with the familiar, indifferent demeanor she usually presents to the world.

“From what I can tell, *Barbara*,” she says, tone cold. “Your daughter is standing right here beside her.”

Barbara grips Monica’s arm so tightly that her face scrunches up in pain. She lifts a finger to point at Chiara again. “She’s a bad influence! My little girl wouldn’t think of such things on her own. Living on your side of the city, it may be normal for young girls to drink, but I am not going to allow this!”

Carolina bites her lips before saying, “I’m going to let your comment slide since you always do so much for her. But I sure as *fuck* have not allowed this either, and I am sure the girls learned their lesson tonight. Haven’t you?”

Both of them nod at her, mumbling a yes. Chiara once more whispers how sorry she is.

“It won’t happen again, Barbara.” Carolina’s tone is a bit warmer now, and I notice her hands are shaking before she crosses them over her chest.

“Yes, it won’t happen again because I will not let that gutter rat hang around my daughter anymore.”

I suck in a breath. It’s like a flip of a switch, and Carolina steps in front of Barbara, her hands at her sides again, formed into fists. Her body remains composed, but her golden eyes spit fire.

“What did you just call her?” she asks, her voice dangerously calm.

Clay steps forward, placing a hand on Carolina’s shoulder, trying to defuse the situation.

“Ladies, let’s not let things get out of hand,” he suggests. Carolina twists to look at Clay, then me, and I catch a fleeting expression of surprise in her eyes before it disappears. *She hadn’t even noticed us until now?* “It’s late, and emotions are running high. I say we end this discussion now. Let the girls get some rest, and you can talk about this some more tomorrow.”

Carolina nods, and Barbara approaches me. “So, how much is the fine?” she asks.

“Fine?” Carolina repeats, her gaze shifting to Chiara, who keeps her eyes fixed on her shoes.

Clay answers, “The penalty for underage drinking in public is four hundred dollars.”

Carolina’s eyes close for a moment before she takes a deep breath. Opening them slowly again, she turns to Chiara and whispers, “*Questo è la metà dell’affitto, Chiara.*” <That’s half the rent.>

She nods, and silent tears are falling down her cheeks. “*Lo so, mi dispiace.*” <I know, I am sorry.>

Barbara steps in front of Clay and me. “When we pay this fine, there will be no records of this, right?” she asks, but my eyes are on Carolina.

She is crouching down, her backpack on the floor before her, searching through it. She pulls out some dollar bills from her purse and a variety of hidden compartments within her bag. It looks like the biggest bills she has are two twenties.

“Yes, don’t worry, ma’am. When the fine is paid, there is nothing left to do, and there will be no records of this offense,” Clay assures her, handing her the slip of paper.

Barbara takes hold of Monica’s wrist. As she walks out, she calls over her shoulder, “We’ll discuss this again, Carolina!”

Carolina just looks after her as she stands, money in her hand, retrieving a few more bills from her jeans pocket. “Lina...” Chiara begins, eyes watering again.

Carolina simply utters a quiet “*Taci*” before she comes over and stands in front of us. “Here, four hundred,” she says, handing me the money.

“I am sorry, you’d have to pay it online, by mail, or in person at the city’s finance department. Here...” I hand her the paper, “... all the details are on it.”

She blushes. “Sure,” she mumbles, taking the paper from me and putting it and her money in her backpack. It hurts to see her like that, and I cannot imagine how that proud girl feels right now. “Thank you for looking after her and keeping her safe,” she says, avoiding eye contact. “See you Monday.”

Carolina drapes an arm around Chiara, and they start to leave when I offer, “Wait, how will you get home? We could give you a lift.”

Carolina halts and turns back to face us. “Thanks, but we’ll manage,” she says.

Clay approaches, placing himself in their path. “No arguing, Karen. We’re driving you home.”

Chiara shoots Carolina a look at the name but wisely decides to keep her mouth shut.

“Sure, whatever.” She sighs, reaching for her temple with a pained expression.

The simple gesture shows how much this whole thing has exhausted her. The Carolina I got to know this past week would never simply submit to Clay.

“Let’s get you two home,” I say, guiding them out of the room.

The walk out to the patrol car is quiet, yet the air is thick with tension. I want to say something so badly—ask so many questions—but I know it will only be met with hostility, and there has been enough stress for Carolina for one night.

As they fasten their seat belts in the backseat, Carolina says, “I never imagined I’d end up in a police car.”

Clay chuckles. “Yeah, and Chiara managed to score a ride twice in one night.” I give him an elbow nudge. “What? Too

soon?” he teases.

“Where do you live?” I ask, starting the car and glancing at Carolina in the rearview mirror.

“You can just drop us off somewhere in Harlem,” she says.

My brows furrow. “Nonsense. Give me your address.”

Chiara is the one who rattles it off, and I get why Carolina hesitated. It’s a notorious street lined with filthy old buildings. A place where we frequently respond to shootings.

The drive is quiet, with only the soft hum of music from the radio filling the car.

“Thank you for not freaking out and handling this so well,” I hear Chiara whisper.

“Oh, don’t worry, you’ll get an earful when we get home,” Carolina whispers back.

I smile to myself and glance at Clay, who is already grinning.

Pulling up to the building, Chiara steps out of the car, murmuring a quick “Thank you.”

Carolina, however, lingers a moment, the unbuckled seat belt in her hand. “Thank you for getting her. My sister isn’t typically the type to get into trouble. I’ll make sure you won’t see her in a police car again.”

Clay chuckles. “Don’t worry, we all did stuff like that when we were teenagers. This won’t lead her into a life of crime.”

She nods and exits the car. Then we watch as they enter the shabbiest fucking building on the street.

While I start the car again, Clay huffs. “Sister. God, I was going nuts trying to do the math on how she could be her mother.”

I nod. “Did you see where they live? And we just made it harder for her by another four hundred, which looked like all the money she had.”

“I know, I hated it. But we couldn’t fine the other bitch of a mother and not her. Taking back the penalty after it’s already been issued isn’t so easy either,” he says.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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### **Carolina**

It's Monday afternoon, and I'm working on a case with Sophia, but my mind is still stuck on what went down Saturday night. I can't believe Chiara did that. I mean, yeah, it wasn't a major screwup. They're just dumb teenagers, and it's normal for them to sneak out for parties. But getting busted by the police and ending up at the very station I work at, thanks to my boss's brother and friend? That's just insane.

And let's not forget the embarrassment of scraping together every last penny I had. I can still see the pity in Josh's eyes, and I don't want to face him again, but I know it's inevitable.

Now they've seen where I live too. I'm so fucking embarrassed by this whole situation that I actually thought about skipping my internship and dropping out of college.

Howie would definitely welcome me and save me a spot by his side. But then Chiara would suffer, which brings me right back to why I'm caught up in this goddamn mess called my life.

*I swear, that girl is so damn lucky I love her.*

I visited Howie yesterday before my shift at the bar to fill him in on getting my job back and tell him about our little escapade with the cops.

He just cracked up laughing and said, "Well, at least you'll be free from that boy if Chiara's smart enough to dump his sorry ass after ditching her."

But honestly, she's so damn love-struck that I bet she's already running right back into his arms.

The door swings open, and in walk Josh and Clay. I take a deep breath, bracing myself for the sarcastic crap that's about to pour out of Clay's mouth as soon as he gets to me. I swear, I'll never hear the end of this humiliation from him. Knowing him, he's going to milk it forever.

"Ladies," he says, coming over to my desk. "Oh, come on, Karen, you look so unapproachable."

"And yet, here you are," I mutter, making him chuckle.

"Oh, little Karen," he singsongs. "And little Karen is funny because you're short as fuck." He reaches out to tap my nose, and I shoot him a glare. "You know, you could have let me in on the secret that your date last Friday was with my boyfriend."

Josh, who is leaning against Sophia's desk with his arms crossed, chokes on his own breath before blurting out, "What?"

I meet Clay's brown gaze and narrow my stare.

"And on your birthday of all days, that one got me, Karen. Why wasn't I invited?"

"It was your birthday last Friday?" Sophia asks, but Josh jumps in.

"Can we focus on the fact that he just said Carolina dated Xander?" His eyes widen in disbelief.

"It was a damn tattoo appointment." I clench my teeth.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Sophia asks.

"Because it wasn't important," I say.

"Of course, it's important! I would have baked you a cake," she nearly yells.

Clay chuckles but quickly bites his lips when I give him another glare.

"Can't you ever keep your mouth shut?" I ask.

“Nope,” he pops the ‘P’ and grins mischievously.

“You’re definitely coming to my birthday get-together on Sunday. We’ll celebrate our birthdays together,” Sophia declares.

“Can’t. I’m having a headache this weekend,” I say.

Josh snickers, and Sophia glares at me.

“Na-ah, Carolina, you’re coming! We’ll eat cake, drink, and have fun. Consider it an order from your boss.” She giggles.

I don’t want to go, but I can’t come up with any excuses. Plus, since I plan on working with her for the foreseeable future, it’s probably a good idea to ensure she likes me. It might blur professional boundaries, but it could earn me some points with her.

“When and where is it?” I ask reluctantly.

“You can finally give me your number, and I’ll text you the address. We’ll start with cake in the afternoon around four and just hang out until we’re tired from the drinks,” she replies with a smile.

“Okay, but I’ll have to leave by five,” I say.

“That’s fine,” Sophia reassures me. “Just glad you’re coming.”

“Why, you have another date with my man?” Clay chuckles. “Was your goal to get him into bed too? I’m sorry I unintentionally got in the way, but I’m sure he’s up for it if you want to try again. I’d encourage such behavior since it’s my bed too.” He winks at me.

I huff. “Don’t be rude to me. My level of rudeness will out-rude yours, and I’ll make you cry.”

“Why do you have to leave so early?” Clay asks, being nothing but persistent.

“I work at a bar in the evenings, and I bet it takes some time to get back to Harlem from where it’s located.” I shrug. *She’s living somewhere nice, for sure.*

Josh laughs. “*Anyway*, are you guys up for grabbing something to eat?”

“Oh, absolutely,” Sophia says, getting up from her desk.

He then looks at me and asks, “Are you coming?”

“No, I’m going to finish this up and head out afterward, if that’s okay?” I ask.

“Come on, Karen, don’t be like that,” Clay chimes in, giving me puppy dog eyes.

“Nope,” I respond, focused on my computer screen.

“Give me your number real quick so I can text you the details,” Sophia says, and without much thought, I jot it down for her. When I glance up, I notice Clay already has his phone in hand, apparently having typed in my number too.

“Please hesitate to contact me,” I tell him before turning back to my work.

Sophia grabs her bag and says, “See you tomorrow. Let’s go, boys.”

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## **Josh**

We leave the office and make our way to the cafeteria. Once we all have our food and settle at our usual table, I interrogate Clay. “What happened on Friday?”

“I told you I wanted to give Xander a ride home because the car was in the shop, and when I got there, he was finishing up and checking out Carolina. She got a pretty cool tattoo done. I think Xander already shared it on his socials,” he says.

Curious, I pull out my phone, fingers almost itching with anticipation. *Why do I feel this need to know more about her?*

There’s a beautifully detailed dead crow on Xander’s profile. “Wow, that’s stunning,” I comment, genuinely impressed but also wondering what it means to her.

Sophia leans over to look at my phone too. “He did an amazing job. Was it one of his designs?”

Clay grins. “No, it was her idea. He redid a sketch she made. I haven’t seen it, but he says it was pretty damn good.”

That surprises me. So, she draws? Another layer to her mystery. “And how did you know it was her birthday? I still can’t believe she didn’t tell me. I would have brought cake and balloons and stuff,” Sophia says.

“She would have hated that.” I grin.

Clay shrugs. “She filled out the paperwork before Xander started her tattoo.”

“So, she didn’t tell you, you know it from the form?” I ask, feeling somehow relieved.

“You think she’d share anything important with me?” Clay snickers.

Sophia laughs. “And here I thought you two were bonding.”

“I’m just glad she hasn’t punched me yet,” Clay mutters.

“Oh, I would pay to see that.” Sophia leans back in her chair.

“Ha-ha, thanks. So nice of you, sis,” Clay mutters.

“I’m not your sis. I only take responsibility for this dumbass,” Sophia says, pointing her thumb at me.

“Love you too,” I say. “You think she will come Sunday?”

Sophia shrugs. “Seems likely. She doesn’t strike me as someone who’d back out on her word.”

“I thought of getting her something, considering the weekend she’s had. A small gesture, you know?” I ask, trying to be casual.

Sophia’s mischievous grin doesn’t escape me. “Oh, just a gesture? Sure, Joshy. But if you’re thinking of a gift, make it good.” Clay’s knowing look makes me uneasy. It’s as if he’s

reading my mind. I do my best to keep a straight face. “It’s just a friendly gesture.”

His smirk speaks volumes, and I feel a blush creeping up my neck. *Is it that obvious?*

His smirk remains. “Of course, it is.”

Sophia frowns at us. “And what happened? Why did she have a hard weekend?”

“Nothing,” we both say simultaneously.

She groans in frustration. “God, you’d think you boys are too old for this shit, but here we are.”

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## **Xander**

I fell asleep on the couch again.

The front door opens, and I sit up, the streaming service on the television asking me if I am still watching.

The footsteps are heading upstairs, but a second later, Clay walks into the living room.

“There you are.” He smiles, coming over and laying on top of me, breathing in my scent. “I love the smell of your neck, just behind your ear. I could breathe you in forever.”

I put my arms around him and pull him even closer to me. “Fuck, I missed you. Did you have a good evening?”

I look over at the clock on the surround sound system, just after one in the morning. I actually wanted to stay awake and wait for him.

“Now it’s a good evening,” he murmurs against my skin as I trace slow circles on his back. “How was your day?”

“Finished a tattoo sleeve today. It went pretty well. The dude was chill. Didn’t talk much,” I say, pressing a kiss to his forehead.

Clay laughs softly, pulling back to meet my eyes, “Your favorite kind of client, huh? The silent type.”

“Well, my private life is loud enough with my boy, who seems unable to shut up,” I tease him.

“Oh hush, I am a delight to be around,” he boasts.

“Wouldn’t argue with that,” I say, brushing his tousled hair away from his eyes, a clear sign of a long day at work. “Light of my life.”

His gaze gets soft. “Love of mine,” he says before his lips meet mine.

I groan into the kiss, my hand drifting down to gently massage his neck. Pulling back, he rests his forehead against mine, exhaling softly. “I need a shower.”

“Mind if I join you?” I ask.

He smirks before getting to his feet and reaching out to help me up.

“Oh, I so do not mind,” he says, pulling me to my feet, then we make our way upstairs.

I follow him into our room and close the door behind us before turning back to him. “Do you need help with that?” I ask, nodding to his uniform.

I absolutely love when he wears it, it’s so damn sexy. But I love it even more when he takes it off.

“I’m quicker,” he says, unbuttoning his shirt, making me chuckle.

I pull my black T-shirt over my head, then slide down my sweatpants along with my boxers, standing naked before him. This makes him pause, his gaze fixed on my hard-on, freezing in the middle of taking off his shirt.

“I thought you said you were quicker,” I tease, stepping closer to help him with his shirt and unzip his uniform pants. “God, I love how tight these are on your perfect ass,” I comment, reaching out to give it a squeeze.

He quickly shoves his pants down with his boxers and toes off his socks as he steps out of them. Then he takes my hand, leading me into our en suite bathroom.

After turning on the shower, he pulls me close for a deep kiss. I tilt his head further, gripping his throat and deepening the kiss. He releases a delicious groan, and my grip tightens briefly before I release him. “Get in the shower, love. Or I might just lick you clean.”

Clay chuckles. “That would be pretty hot if I hadn’t sweat so much.”

I lean in to lick his neck. “You know I love you sweaty.”

“Fuck,” Clay murmurs, but I turn him around and nudge him into the shower, giving his ass a slap.

Once we’re under the warm spray, I grab the shampoo and begin washing his hair, massaging his scalp. He leans back against my chest, his head resting on my shoulder. He’s too tempting, and my shampooed hands glide over every inch of his muscular body.

His eyes are closed as he hums contentedly, and I place a gentle kiss on his temple. “Are you tired, love?” I whisper against his skin.

“Never too tired for you,” he replies.

Using the showerhead, I thoroughly rinse him before placing it back so the water can cascade down over us. Then I let my hand wander down to his erection. With him still leaning back against my shoulder, I have the perfect view and see how his abs tense when I grip him.

I stroke him, simultaneously nibbling on his neck. “My boy had such a long day,” I say, gripping him tighter and eliciting a whimper. “Let me help you relax,” I whisper in his ear as my thumb glides over the head of his cock.

“Babe,” he breathes out, his hands reaching behind him to grip my thighs.

“What do you need, light of my life?” I ask, quickening my pace.

He turns to face me, wrapping his arms around my neck and pulling me in for a kiss. The water cascades down us, our bodies slipping against each other. The tips of our cocks touch, and I seize the moment.

With my free hand on his hip, I pull him closer, allowing me to grasp both our cocks in one hand. I stroke us, our shafts rubbing together, my piercings pressing into him with my firm grip.

“Fuck...” Clay moans against my lips, jutting his hips into me.

His weight starts to give, and I tighten my grip on his hip with bruising force to keep him from sliding to the floor.

Resting my forehead against his, I maintain the perfect grip and rhythm on our cocks. “Are you going to be a good boy and come with me?” I ask, panting, my balls drawing up.

“Yes,” Clay responds, his breath shaky, his hands now clutching my shoulders.

I glance down, admiring the contrast of his flawless skin against my tattoos. The head of his cock glistens with precum, and I want to lick it off him so bad, but the thought makes me even hornier, and I growl, the vibration adding to the building pleasure.

“Come for me, love,” I urge, my need for release threatening to take over.

His body is eager to obey. I feel him tense up, and I lean in, capturing his moans with a deep kiss. I increase the pressure as I quicken the pace, stroking us both with fervent desire.

He comes, covering my cock and hand. The sensation of his cum on me triggers my own orgasm, and I bite down on his lip, growling.

We stand there a while, the only sounds around us are running water and our ragged breathing.

When we finally break the kiss, Clay murmurs, “Holy shit.”

I grip his chin and peck his lips. “That’s my good boy.”

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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### **Carolina**

My morning was terrible.

The jerks at the bar last night were complete assholes, and I had to keep reminding myself that it's not okay to smack someone, or I would lose my job *again*. It took forever to get them out, and I got home even later than usual, which resulted in a crappy two hours of sleep.

In class, we got back an assignment we had to do in pairs last week, and it was okay, but not as good as the grades I usually get, which bugs me. So I'm stressed, tired, and grumpy when I walk into Sophia's lab.

"Hey," I say gruffly, tossing my backpack behind my desk and plopping down in my chair.

"Hey yourself," she says, in her super cute voice, giving me a smile. "Here, have some tea. I brought a big thermos today," she announces, placing a mug in front of me. The mug reads *Beau-tea-ful*. I give her a look. She snickers and takes a sip from her cup, showing me what's written on hers—Filled with *positivi-tea*.

"*Dio*," I mutter, looking up at the ceiling.

"Don't be like that, Carolina. We have something fun to do today!" she says.

"And what would that be?" I ask, taking a sip of the tea.

It's pretty good, some kind of green tea. And as the warm liquid heats me from the inside, a bit of my tension releases.

“Today, we have to evaluate whether a suspect was high, mostly on heroin. But it’s going to be a bit challenging because they got the blood samples pretty late, and you know how quickly heroin breaks down in the body.”

My gaze shifts from the cup in my hand to Sophia’s face. Heroin was the drug they accused my parents of using when they had the accident. I place the mug back on the desk and stand.

“Someone’s eager,” Sophia says with a smile.

“Can you walk me through the process step by step?” I ask.

She furrows her brow at me. “You should already know this. It’s not like it’s advanced toxicology.”

“I do know, but I’m curious about how you and the NYPD handle these things,” I explain.

“All right, fine,” she says, sounding suspicious. “Heroin rapidly breaks down in the body into different byproducts, including morphine and 6-acetylmorphine.” She raises an eyebrow at me.

I nod. “I know.”

“Well, I fucking hope so. While morphine can be detected in the blood after heroin use, its presence alone doesn’t conclusively prove heroin use because morphine can also be found in the blood due to the medicinal use of morphine-based drugs. However, the presence of 6-AM is a very strong indicator of recent heroin use, as it’s a specific metabolite of heroin. We typically detect heroin and its metabolites in a blood sample using gas chromatography, mass spectrometry or liquid chromatography-mass spectrometry.”

I nod again. That’s exactly how I would have approached it. “All right, shall we get started?”

“Sure,” she says, buttoning up her coat and grabbing her gloves.

We ran the tests, confirming the presence of 6-acetylmorphine, which suggests the person was under the

influence.

“So now you just tell the officers on the case that he used heroin?” I ask.

“No, I inform them that we found indications of substance influence, but there could be other reasons for the result, so they would need to investigate other drugs he may have used, among other things,” she explains, looking at me and tilting her head. “Why are you asking, Carolina? I know you’re eager to learn, but this all seems like pretty basic knowledge, and I find it hard to believe that you wouldn’t know that. Is there a particular reason this case has caught your interest?”

*Am I that transparent, or is she just perceptive?*

“There’s a personal reason,” I admit, shifting my gaze to the computer screen where we reviewed the results.

“And are you going to share it with me?” she asks.

I can’t bring myself to look at her but say, “It’s about my parents.”

“Are they being accused of using or dealing heroin? If you’re confident they’re innocent, I can look up their file and reexamine the tests if they’re recent enough,” she offers.

I finally meet her eyes. “You would do that?”

She lets out a huff. “Of course, I would. When were they arrested?” she asks, already sitting behind her computer.

“No, I’m sorry. I was just surprised that you would do that for me,” I admit, my voice quieter now. “They died in a car crash five years ago, and the police told me they were driving under the influence.”

She looks at me with sympathetic eyes. “But you don’t believe it.”

“They didn’t even drink. I don’t believe they were using, but everyone involved just told me that kids don’t always see the whole picture.”

She nods understandingly. “Would you like to see their file yourself? Do you think that would bring you some peace of

mind?”

My eyes widen. “We can do that?”

She shrugs. “We can certainly try. We can request the case as a reference. I can’t make any promises, but we ask for old cases all the time, so why not use this privilege to give you some closure?”

Tears well up in my eyes. “Thank you, Sophia.”

She smiles sadly at me and reaches over to pat my hand. “Thank me when we have the case. What were their names?”

“Carlo and Isabella Costa,” I say, my heart aching.

Sophia gives my hand a comforting squeeze. “I’ll see what I can do.”

The door swings open, and I quickly compose myself, forcing my eyes to stop watering as Clay and Josh enter. *Fucking perfect timing for the douchebags.*

They walk over to us, both looking way too good. *Hot as hell douchebags*, I mentally correct myself.

“Hey there, Karen. Made anyone cry today?” Clay asks, casually leaning against my desk.

“Sadly, no. But it’s only four thirty, and you only just walked in,” I snark.

I glance at Josh, who tries to hide his smile behind his hand, but I can still see one of his dimples. Amusement sparkles in his eyes.

“Yeah, exactly! It’s only four thirty. What brings you guys here so early? That’s like an early, early bird dinner,” Sophia says.

“We forgot to buy groceries again, so we haven’t eaten anything yet. And you know how grumpy Josh gets without his sugar fix,” Clay answers, grabbing a pen from my desk to fiddle with.

“Just because I don’t like going hungry doesn’t mean I’m grumpy,” Josh murmurs. “We thought we’d grab something

small to eat, and you can have a tea or something, and later, we can go get some takeout and bring you something?”

“All right,” Sophia agrees, getting up from her chair.

“Come on, Karen, you can’t say no to tea,” Clay adds, twirling the pen between his fingers.

I’m about to respond when Sophia interrupts, “Carolina is going home now.”

I look at her in shock, wondering what I did wrong. “I am?”

“You are. Get some rest. We’ve done enough for today,” she says.

I quickly pack my bag and follow them out of the office.

“Hey, how are you, Carolina?” Josh asks, walking beside me, his arm occasionally brushing against mine.

“All right, thanks. You?” I ask, trying to sound indifferent, but being mean to him is becoming harder the longer I know him. He’s just such a genuinely nice and kind person.

*I think I like him.*

“I’m good, thank you.” He smiles. “We’re planning to go to this burger place later, and they have the best donuts. Do you like donuts?”

“Sure.” I shrug, not quite sure where he’s going.

*Is he thinking food would be a good conversation starter with the fat girl?*

“I could grab some for you guys too, and bring them over tomorrow,” he offers.

“That’s kind but not necessary,” I reply, just as we reach the hallway leading to the exit. “See you.”

“Bye, Carolina,” I hear Josh say.

Then Clay, in a teasing, high-pitched voice, adds, “Bye, Carolina,” and makes smooching sounds.

“Shut up, idiot,” Josh hisses at him.

With my back turned to them, I can't help but smile.

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Since I have an extra hour of free time, I decide to make my way to the homeless shelter, grabbing two burgers along the way. I find Howie lying on his bed, his eyes closed, and fingers crossed over his chest. Thinking he's asleep, I plan to leave the burger for him and quietly exit when he speaks up.

"You were just here two days ago, kid," he murmurs, his eyes still shut. "Did something happen again? Did Chiara get herself locked up?"

"Why can't I just bring you a burger and spend some time with you?" I ask, settling down on the edge of the bed.

"You certainly can, but would you come all the way here just for that?" he asks. He sits up and joins me on the edge of the bed, so I hand him his burger. "You have no idea how much I miss my daily burgers," he says, opening the package and taking a bite. "Thank you."

He still seems skinny, but there's a bit more to him now. "The food here treats you well. You're looking good."

He shrugs it off. "Just packing on my winter fat while I can." His eyebrow shoots up. "What brings you here, Lina?"

"So, I told you I'm interning at the toxicology unit at NYPD," I say.

He nods. "Yeah, you did. I may be old, but I'm not senile."

I snort. "My boss said she's going to get my parents' file so I can see for myself whether there were signs of them being on heroin."

He gives me a scrutinizing look. "Are you sure this is what you want?"

"Why wouldn't it be?" I ask, taking another bite.

"Your conviction, right or wrong, is the bedrock of your resilience, Lina. You've done everything and excelled in

school, college, and life because you believed your parents were falsely accused. But what if they did crash because they were high? Can you handle that truth? Can you say it wouldn't kick your legs out from under you?"

I stare down at my burger, "I don't know. But I need to find out, Howie," I murmur, looking back up into his blue eyes.

"Sometimes, believing in something helps us cope, and I don't want you to spiral if what you've believed turns out to be wrong."

"I can't possibly sink any lower," I say, a bitter huff escaping me.

"Oh, you'd be surprised, kid. You think you're at rock bottom, but from where I'm sitting, it looks like you're climbing your way up and out."

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

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### **Carolina**

Just as I'm locking up after the last customer has left, my phone buzzes in my jeans back pocket. I grimace, having had enough late-night calls lately.

Taking it out, I glance at the screen. To my relief, it's not the police again or a hospital, but Bernie, the owner of the bar where Roberto frequently nurtures his alcohol problem.

*Am I going to hell for hoping he is calling to tell me Roberto has drunk himself to death?*

I answer the call. "Bernie," I greet. "What's up?"

"Roberto is causing trouble again," he states, and I curse quietly.

"What happened?" I ask, heading to the back of the bar and my locker.

"He got blackout drunk again and started making a scene outside the bar. I tried to get him back inside, but he wouldn't listen. Someone called the cops, and now they're threatening to take him in. I'm not sure how much longer I can keep them at bay, Carolina."

"On my way," I respond, hanging up.

"Cindy!" I call out toward Donny's office, where she's been hiding out all night. "Could you take care of closing, please? There's an emergency," I say, pulling on my jacket.

"Again? All right, but you owe me twice now," she says.

I roll my eyes but manage to shout a quick “Thanks!” before heading out through the bar’s back door.

Roberto could rot in the drunk tank forever for all I care, but his arrest could cause serious complications. Chiara might end up in foster care, and my chances of getting her back would be slim to non-existent. My situation hasn’t improved since the last time they rejected me.

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## Clay

Josh fiddles with the radio while I drive through Harlem, trying to find a station that doesn’t play country music. He only manages to make it worse.

“Stop that shit. Are you nervous?” I quickly glance at him before returning my focus to the road.

“No. It just feels too quiet, I guess,” he responds.

I nod. Tonight is unusually calm. During our recent late shifts, we’ve made it a point to request the patrols near or in Harlem. Neither of us would admit it, but ever since we saw how Carolina lived, we both felt a need to ensure the streets around her house were secure. The fact that I’m driving around her neighborhood again confirms what I’ve desperately tried to deny.

*I care about this girl.*

I’m not entirely sure in which way yet, but I care enough to want to personally ensure her safety at night. That’s more than I’ve ever felt for any woman except Sophia.

*Fuck.*

As I think about this fuck-up, I notice movement to my right. Turning to see what it is, I spot a black ponytail swinging as a girl sprints down the street.

“Is that...” Josh starts, seeing the same thing.

“It is. Is someone chasing her?” I quickly scan the street from where she came from, but there’s no one in sight.

“No, it looks like she’s running toward something. Follow her,” Josh says.

I’m already doing so, but I step on the gas to keep pace with her. “Why is she running at this hour?” I ask, but he’s bracing himself against his seat belt, ready to spring out of the car if necessary.

We tail her around a corner, only to see another police car parked in front of a bar. Two cops are confronting a middle-aged man, and Carolina doesn’t slow down until she’s standing protectively in front of him. Her chest heaves, and she is panting hard, but her arms are outstretched in a stop motion.

*It’s odd. The shortest woman I know always ends up in front of others, attempting to shield them.*

“Which officers are they?” I ask, trying to make out the faces of the policemen.

“Taylor and Del Moro,” Josh answers with a grimace.

“Fuck, let’s go.”

We exit the car and approach the tense standoff. The guy who seems to be the bar’s owner stands nervously at the entrance, his eyes darting between our colleagues and Carolina.

“I’ve got him now. There’s no need to take him in. I promise to get him home safely,” Carolina says, her voice steady, still panting slightly.

“I don’t think so,” Taylor responds. “He’s caused a lot of trouble and is a risk to everyone around him. We need to take him in.”

Del Moro, meanwhile, smirks cruelly at Carolina.

“Look at him...” she motions over her shoulder, “... I’ll have to practically drag him home. He’s in no condition to hurt anyone but himself, and I promise to make sure he won’t do that. You’re done here. Thank you for your service.”

I suppress a smile at her sassy tone, but Taylor remains unfazed and reaches for his handcuffs.

“No.” Carolina’s eyes fill with panic as she turns to Del Moro. “Martin, please,” she says, clearly struggling with the fact she has to plead with him, but he merely grins.

“Rules are rules, Costa.”

*And enough is enough.*

I walk over and place a hand on Del Moro’s shoulder. “Indeed, my friend. And the rules do state that if there’s a reliable person to ensure an individual can sober up safely, we don’t need to take them in.”

He shakes my hand off. “He disturbed the peace in this bar. We have to arrest him for that.”

I look over to the bar owner. “For that, the owner would need to press charges. Are you pressing charges?”

He seems much more relaxed now, leaning against his door frame with his arms crossed over his chest. “Absolutely not.” He smiles smugly.

I turn back to Del Moro. “See, no need to bring out your fancy handcuffs. You can leave now, rookie.”

Del Moro shoots me a glare, then turns back to Carolina. “Trash, the whole fucking family,” he spits out before muttering to Taylor, “Let’s go.”

They climb into their car and drive off. I watch them until they’re out of sight, then turn back to the remaining group. During the confrontation, Josh moved closer to Carolina, who now regards me with a cold, apathetic gaze.

“You know, I’m always ready to accept your gratitude,” I joke, hoping to ease the tension.

She bites her cheek before managing a stiff, “Thanks.”

*That definitely didn’t lighten the mood as I’d hoped.*

“Are you okay?” Josh asks.

I look at her more closely. Her cheeks are pink, either from the cold or from running. Her hair is tousled, her ponytail barely hanging on, and an apron is tied under the leather jacket she's left open.

*Did she work this late again?*

She had classes today and also spent hours working with Sophia. *Does this woman ever sleep?*

"I'm fine," she says curtly before turning to the man. "Let's get you home."

She attempts to guide him, but he slurs, "No! I want another drink, *pig!*"

My eyes meet Josh's, who's already watching me.

Carolina snaps at the man, "*Stai zitto, non voglio sentirlo, ci sono poliziotti qui!*" <Shut up, I don't wanna hear you, there are cops here!>

He slurs back, "I don... give a fuck."

He tries to push her away but missteps and loses his balance. She takes the opportunity and slings an arm around his waist, looking fucking tiny next to him.

"We can help you get him home," Josh offers.

She shakes her head and starts to walk with him. "No, thanks."

Josh blocks their path, standing in front of them. "You can't drag him home on your own."

"Get out of the way," she hisses at him, her face angry and her eyes brimming with embarrassment while she struggles to keep the man up. Then her gaze falls on Josh's badge, and she closes her eyes, taking a deep breath before whispering, "Please."

I don't think I've heard her ever say that word before, and now she has said it twice. Josh simply nods and steps aside, allowing them to pass.

We watch as Carolina tries to support the drunk, who stumbles over his own feet and is cussing her out the whole

time as they move down the street.

“Is that her father?” I ask Josh, raising an eyebrow.

“It’s her uncle,” the bar owner says. “Her parents are dead.” My stomach drops at his words. “Do you guys know her?”

I glance at Josh.

“We do. We’re friends,” is all he shares.

“Then do me a favor and keep an eye on her, okay? That girl is a gem and doesn’t deserve the rough hand life dealt her,” he adds before nodding and retreating into his bar.

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## **Carolina**

The weight of Roberto’s body presses heavily against me as I half-drag and half-carry him up the stairs to our apartment. Each step feels like a mountain, and the stench of alcohol on his breath is overwhelming.

I have to breathe through my mouth to avoid the smell.

“*Come on, stronzo,*” I mutter, trying to keep my voice steady. “Just a few more steps.”

Once inside, I manage to get him to his room, using every ounce of strength I have. I let him fall onto his bed, not caring how he lands.

*I need to get away from him.*

I head to the kitchen, my heart pounding in my chest. The embarrassment of Clay and Josh witnessing, yet again, another sliver of my life threatens to bring tears to my eyes, but I blink them away.

A loaf of bread on the counter taunts me, and I consider making myself a sandwich, but a loud thump echoes from Roberto’s room, followed by his slurred shouting.

My heart sinks. I don't want him to wake Chiara. Rushing to his room, I find him sprawled on the floor, having fallen out of bed.

“Oh, *Dio*, come on,” I say, trying to help him up.

It's a struggle, but I manage to get him on his feet. When he stands, his eyes, clouded with anger and alcohol, lock onto mine.

“You thin... yer better tha... me?” he slurs.

I want to tell him to just go to sleep, but before I can open my mouth, he pulls his arm back and punches me. The force of the blow sends me reeling, and pain explodes in my temple. Stars immediately take over my vision as it blurs, and my body sways from the impact.

He stumbles back to bed, mumbling incoherently, and leaving me in a daze.

I drag myself to the bathroom, my head throbbing. I lock the door behind me and let myself slide to the floor. The cold tiles against my skin offer a slight relief from the pain, but the weight of the night presses heavily on my chest. I take a deep, shaky breath before I whisper to myself.

“Only two more years.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY

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### **Carolina**

While sitting at my desk in Sophia's lab, I fold my hands and rest my chin on them. Then take a moment to stare at the mug she gave me today. It reads, *Spill the tea, sis*.

It's like Sophia has an endless supply of these dorky things.

She's in the office next door, chit-chatting about a case with a coworker, and I'm here, convinced that the universe is out to get me.

For the second time in no time at all, Clay and Josh have seen me at my worst. They know where I live, watched me searching for dollar bills, figured out my little sister is shit at sneaking out, and now they've met Roberto.

I swear, I would have disappeared into the ground last night if I could.

If it weren't for them, Roberto would be behind bars. Del Moro didn't give a fuck about my pleas. He would have loved every second of it.

And now, to top it all off, I'm supposed to thank Josh and Clay for what they did. There's no way the incident can be forgotten. My luck isn't that good.

I groan, shifting my head to rest my forehead on my hands, my eyes shut tight. I mumble under my breath, "Fuck, fuck, fuck," while lightly thumping my head on my knuckles.

Just as I'm about to let my head drop again, a hand intercepts, palm up.

"Knock it off. You're gonna hurt yourself," Josh warns, coming out of nowhere, startling me. I recoil while staring at him with wide eyes. "It can't be that bad, can it?" he asks, a grin on his face. But then, his gaze shifts to my temple.

It hurt like hell for a few hours last night, but now it's just swollen. It doesn't look as bad as it did this morning since I managed to cover the redness with makeup, but there was no hiding the lump.

"What happened?" Josh asks, stepping closer and gently lifting my chin with his finger.

His touch catches me off guard, making my stomach tingle, and I let him lean in to take a closer look before regaining my senses and leaning back out of his reach.

"It's nothing." I brush it off.

"That sure as fuck doesn't look like 'nothing,'" Clay chimes in from the other side of my desk.

*Damn, I didn't even notice him there.*

"Did your uncle do this?" Josh asks, studying my face.

I don't want to lie, so I tell him, "He hit me while falling, flailing his arms. It's not as bad as it looks." My tone grows colder with each word.

"Yeah, about that," Clay starts, but Josh holds up a finger to stop him.

"Do you need to see a doctor, Carolina? It looks bad," he asks.

I roll my eyes. "No, I don't."

"She's fine. It's just a minor bruise, right? Nothing important, no big deal," Clay says, his tone carrying a challenge, gaze narrowing at me.

"Oh, I'm sure you'd know if it wasn't, seeing as you seem to have a vast medical knowledge," I retort.

He huffs. “Now you’re overestimating me.”

“Well, it’s hard to underestimate you,” I say.

“Yep, you’re okay.” Josh chuckles.

“So, spill the tea, sis,” Clay says, smirking down at that ridiculous mug. “What was the deal with yesterday?”

*Is he really asking me to talk about Roberto?* No freaking way. I’m just about to tell him to fuck off when he goes on.

“What’s your beef with Del Moro? What’s the source of all this bad blood between you guys? Is he an ex?”

I nearly choke on my own spit. “Hell no.”

Josh seems to relax next to me, making me glance at him.

“So, what’s up? I’m curious too. You guys seem to genuinely hate each other.”

I could tell them it’s none of their business, but they did bail me out yesterday, and it looks like that won’t be our last run-in with him.

*Fuck.*

“We do hate each other, but it wasn’t always like this. His father was a family friend, and our families used to hang out a lot. His dad and my uncle were especially close. We saw each other almost every weekend and at school. Then, some stuff happened between my uncle and his dad, and they never came over again. They moved out of the neighborhood, and he started bullying me at school. And I don’t mean harmless name-calling. It was brutal.”

Clay’s jaw clenches as he asks, “What did he do?”

“I’m not going into that with you,” I say. “I’ve already said too much.”

They exchange a look just as the door swings open, and Sophia walks in.

“Hey boys, what’s going on?” she asks.

“Karen just told us why Del Moro is a total asshole to her,” Clay informs her.

“Oh?” Sophia raises an eyebrow at me.

“Yeah, no valid reason, just a grade-A bully. I know that type all too well,” Clay says, pulling out his phone. A second later, mine buzzes. “That’s my number. If you ever need anything, if he gets too close, or if you ever feel unsafe, you call me.”

He locks eyes with me, and my heart misses a beat before I remember that people say stuff like this all the time but hardly mean it.

I scoff. “Sure, whatever.”

Clay places his hand on my desk and leans in close until our noses are almost touching. “I mean it, Carolina. If you need me, you call.”

The fact that he’s calling me by my real name for the first time ever gives me pause, and I nod, dropping my gaze to my hands.

“So, are we grabbing something to eat?” Josh attempts to change the topic.

“Oh yes, I dreamed about spaghetti last night, and I absolutely need it now,” Sophia states.

“I think I know the answer, but I’m still gonna ask. You coming with us, Carolina? Please?” Josh asks, flashing me his dimpled smile.

“No, thanks. I’m gonna finish up here,” I say, and he nods.

“I won’t give up.” He winks at me.

*Is he flirting?*

No way.

But why must he be so cute, nice, and drop-dead gorgeous? Even after everything he witnessed?

“See you, Karen.” Clay reverts to his usual somewhat jerkish self, which I can’t deny I’m starting to like.

The guys are so caught up discussing their dinner plans that they don’t notice Sophia lingering behind.

“Carolina,” she starts softly, causing me to look up. The concern in her eyes is palpable. “You know, I noticed the lump earlier, although you did a good job trying to hide it.” I open my mouth to deflect, but she continues, “You don’t have to tell me everything or anything at all, really. But if you ever need to talk, you know I’m here, right?”

Swallowing hard, I nod. The sincerity in her eyes is hard to ignore. “Thank you. But it was just an accident.”

She approaches, placing a comforting hand on my shoulder. “Even accidents can leave scars, visible or not. Always know you have people around who care...” She pauses, her gaze searching mine. “Are you okay?”

For a moment, I contemplate lying, saying everything’s fine. But with Sophia’s empathetic gaze on me, I murmur, “I will be.”

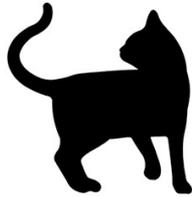
*She doesn’t have to know it will take two years to get there.*

“Whenever you’re ready, just spill the tea, sis.” She indicates my mug with a gentle smile, offering a moment of levity.

Feeling a little lighter, I manage a small smile. “Thanks.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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### **Carolina**

Donny saunters over as I'm wiping down the table left behind by the last patron. "Looks like it's an early night tonight," he says, "You can head home now. I still have some paperwork to sort out in my office, but I forgot my key. Give me yours so I can lock up later?"

I glance at him and then check the time. It's only twelve thirty, but I won't argue about getting some extra sleep.

Digging out my keys from my back pocket, I unhook the bar key and pass it to him.

"Thanks."

I make my way through the kitchen to the back, where I find Lennard and Matteo by their lockers, pulling out their jackets. Joining them, I reach for my own.

"You're finishing up early today, Carolina," Lennard observes.

"Don't jinx it," I say, pushing through the door with them into the cold night.

"Do you want me to walk you home, *carina*?" Matteo offers.

"I'll manage," I say, walking away.

It's cold. I can see my breath misting up under the streetlamps. But the walk is short, and soon, I'm in our

apartment. I shed my jacket, placing my backpack beside it before heading to our room.

I want to check on Chiara and gather my things to get ready for bed, but when I open the door, my little sister is getting pounded from behind by a tall but scrawny guy with a mop of blond hair on his head.

“Chiara!” I yell, my hand gripping the cold metal of the doorknob so tightly that my knuckles turn white.

Chiara’s eyes widen in shock when her head snaps toward me. A gasp escapes her lips before she lets out a horrified scream. The boy, equally startled, freezes for a split second. Then, in a frantic rush, he slides down next to her, their hands fumbling and tangling as they both desperately scramble for the discarded blanket to cover themselves.

For a moment, I’m rooted to the spot, my mind struggling to process what I just saw, but finally I raise my hand to shield my eyes, wishing I could erase the last few seconds from memory. “*Che cazzo fai?*” <What the fuck are you doing?>

“Why are you home so early?” she squeaks out in a panicked tone.

“Why am I home?” I let my hand fall and watch as Chiara pulls the blanket closer to her chest, exposing the scrawny guy I assume is Leo and his dick before he takes *my* fucking pillow to cover himself.

“I can’t deal with this right now,” I say, spinning on my heels to exit the room and shutting the door behind me. Then I lean against it for a moment, taking a deep breath.

Just then, I hear the front door creak open. I dart into the bathroom, leaving the door just slightly ajar. Peering through the gap, I watch Roberto stumble into the living room, promptly turning on the television with the volume up high.

I linger a minute longer before moving to the front door, grabbing my jacket and backpack, and leaving the apartment. Once in the stairwell, I dial Chiara.

“I swear I didn’t—” She begins, but I cut her off.

“Roberto just got home.” I hear her inhale sharply at my words. “Keep that boy in your room. Set an alarm for five thirty. Roberto should be asleep by then, and he can leave. Don’t risk anything. If Roberto sees him, he will hurt both of you.”

“Okay,” she whispers back with a shaky breath.

“And Chiara, we *are* going to talk about that shit some more later, but what were you thinking? I sleep in that bed too, *porca miseria!* <Dammit!> You are going to wash those bedsheets tomorrow, *twice!*”

“Okay,” she whispers once more before I end the call.

I slip on my jacket and pocket my phone, heading back to the bar. But it seems Donny has already shut everything down. No lights are on, and no one responds to my knocking.

*Fuck, what do I do now?*

I can’t stay outside for hours. It’s too chilly, and the shelter closes its doors at night, so I can’t go to Howie either.

I head back to our apartment building, where I can wait in the stairwell. It’s not exactly warm, but it’s definitely warmer than outside. As I walk, a weird feeling of being watched creeps over me. I scan my surroundings, but all I see are some people laughing in the distance and a stray cat darting across the street—nobody else in sight.

“Pull your shit together,” I mutter, but that nagging sensation just grows stronger.

I take a turn and pause, glancing over my shoulder. A shadow disappears behind a building. Fuck, I’m right in front of my place now, but if someone follows me in, I’m trapped.

So, I quicken my pace, hoping to lose him in a labyrinth of turns before doubling back to my building. Maybe it’s all in my head, and this feeling will pass soon.

Twenty minutes later, I’m still walking, heart pounding in my chest. Something deep down is screaming at me that I’m in danger.

In a move I never thought I'd make, I get out my phone and dial Clay's number.

He picks up on the first ring. "What's wrong?"

"I'm... I'm so sorry to—" I stammer, my voice shaking, but he cuts me off.

"Karen, what's going on? Where are you?"

"I-I think someone's following me. I'm too scared to go home," I whisper.

There's a pause, some shuffling, more rustling, then he's back on the line. "I'm heading over. Where are you?"

"Harlem, near the 7-Eleven," I manage to say, my voice laced with fear.

"All right, go inside. Stay on the phone and stay where the cashier can see you. I just got home, so I'll be there in twenty."

I make a beeline for the store, walking quickly but trying not to look too panicked. This might all be in my head, but if it's not, better safe than sorry.

I step inside, casting a glance at the cashier's counter where a kid, maybe eighteen, with acne-ridden skin is working.

The sound of a car door slamming and an engine roaring to life filters through the phone just as Clay asks, "You're inside the store?"

"Yes, I'm in," I confirm.

"Go chat with the cashier," he orders.

"But he's just a kid, and I don't know what to talk about."

"I don't care, Karen. Ask him about the freshness of their eggs for all I care. Just get him to talk to you."

Despite my jitters, I head toward the counter, keeping a watchful eye on the entrance. If someone was tailing me, they wouldn't come in here, right? They'd wait for me to get back out, right?

I approach the kid, who glances up with a bored expression.

“Can I help you?” he asks, sounding anything but helpful.

“Are your eggs fresh?” I blurt out.

Clay’s laughter echoes from the phone.

“My eggs... are you hitting on me?” He looks utterly confused, and my cheeks flame red.

“No, no, never mind,” I say, retreating a step and pretending to inspect the candy bars next to the register.

“Please hurry,” I whisper into the phone.

“I’m almost there, but for the love of god, avoid asking teenagers about their eggs. That shit could end in a harassment complaint, and I’m off-duty,” he teases.

“You told me to ask him that!” I hiss back into the phone.

“I meant store eggs, not his eggs,” he replies, his voice rippling with laughter. “You’re something else, Karen.”

The store doors swing open, and I nearly jump out of my skin. It’s just an elderly lady shuffling in. My breathing must sound ragged over the phone because Clay’s voice grows serious. “You okay?”

“Please hurry,” I whisper back, my heart hammering so fast I feel it in my throat, threatening to choke me.

There is rustling and some muffled voices on his end, then another sound of a car door slamming. My gaze is fixed again on the entry. Minutes pass without him saying anything, and my nervousness grows.

“Clay?” I ask.

“I’m here,” he says, hanging up just as the doors open, and he steps inside. He’s wearing an olive-green parka and gray sweatpants. He scans the store and his gaze lands on me.

He strides over and places his hands on my shoulders, stooping down to my level. “You okay?”

I nod, biting my lip, my eyes welling up.

*He came for me.*

Clay wraps me in a quick hug before nudging me forward, saying to the cashier, “Remember, kid, always keep your eggs fresh.”

Outside, he guides me to a black Ford F-150 and holds open the passenger door for me. It’s quite the step up, so he grips my hips to help me climb in.

Once I’m settled, he shuts the door and jogs around to the driver’s side, sliding behind the wheel and firing up the engine. There’s silence for a beat until I break it.

“Thank you,” I murmur.

He glances at me. “Wanna fill me in on what happened?”

“I came home to find my sister and her new boyfriend doing the deed... in our room,” I say.

He chokes out a laugh. “‘Doing the deed?’ Are you fifty? And why didn’t you just hang out in the living room or something until they were done?”

“Our uncle’s home,” I say, leaving it at that.

His expression turns serious again. “Why is that a problem?”

“Because he’s drunk.” I shrug.

His next words are heavy with what seems like suppressed anger. “Does he hurt you, Carolina?”

“He’s unpredictable when he’s drunk, and I didn’t want to risk it,” I say, choosing to omit the part about him being drunk most of the time.

He nods but doesn’t look happy or convinced. “Makes sense. And you have no idea who might have been tailing you?”

“To be honest, I could’ve just imagined it all. It was just a gut feeling... maybe I got paranoid.” I shrug. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have called.”

“Always trust your gut,” he says before bursting into laughter again. “God, your sister is a handful!”

“I know.” I cringe. “But it’s partly my fault. I’m hardly ever home.”

“That’s bullshit. Sneaking out and messing around is typical teenage stuff. I did it. You probably did too,” Clay says.

I stay silent. I couldn’t afford to do teenage stuff while attending high school and juggling two jobs while caring for an eleven-year-old.

Clay swings a sharp right into a fast-food joint’s parking lot where Xander is standing.

I whip my head back to Clay, surprised. “You brought him?” I ask, shocked.

“Like I could sneak out for a booty call in the middle of the night without him tagging along.” He shrugs.

“This wasn’t a fucking booty call,” I say, just as Xander opens the passenger door.

“Shame,” Xander quips. “Scoot over.”

I slide over on the bench seat, closer to Clay, who wraps an arm around me and pulls me into his side. “Xander’s a big guy.” A teasing grin appears on his face. He eyes me before releasing his hold.

I’m just about to tell him to fuck off when Xander climbs in, needing all the space I just vacated. Now I’m sandwiched between two insanely hot guys, their bodies flush against mine.

*It’s okay to have a crush on a gay couple, right?*

At least I know from the start it won’t lead anywhere.

“Here,” Xander says, handing me a to-go cup, then gives Clay one too. I lean down and catch the familiar aroma of coffee.

“I wasn’t sure how you take your coffee, so I added sugar and some cream,” Xander tells me.

“Just sugar, but this is great, thank you,” I say, taking a sip.

I’m exhausted, and it seems this night won’t end anytime soon.

“Want some?” he offers, extending a white bag toward me.

Peering inside, I spot donuts.

I shake my head. “No, thanks.”

“Love?” he asks, but his eyes are still on mine, and my heart skips a beat.

“You know I don’t eat that sugary junk,” Clay says, pushing his takeout cup into my hand before starting the truck back up.

We park near Riverside Park, where we get a great view of the Hudson River and the lit-up skyline, a few minutes later. Xander reaches behind him and grabs two blankets from under the bench, handing one to Clay and spreading the other over our laps.

The cab will cool down when the heater isn’t on, but I’m nearly sweating between these two. Don’t ask me if it’s their body heat or their nearness.

“Sorry, guys. I didn’t mean to ruin your sleep. I doubt anyone would still be out waiting for me after seeing you rescuing me. They’re probably gone by now. I can go back.”

“And then what would be the plan?” Clay asks, taking a sip of his coffee. “Go in to watch your little sister getting it some more?”

“What?” Xander asks, leaning forward to look at Clay.

“Karen just walked in on her little sixteen-year-old sister getting railed in their room,” Clay shares, and Xander’s eyes fly to mine.

“On our bed.” I shudder.

“Wait, you share a bed with her?” Clay asks, raising his eyebrows.

“Okay, let her get railed, whatever, but why were you outside?” Xander asks at the same time.

“I could go back and stay in the stairway. It’s fine, you don’t have to be outside with me. I bet you’d rather be in your own bed at home. I’m sorry.”

“Stop apologizing. You felt unsafe, so you called. You did exactly what I told you to. I’m glad you did,” Clay assures me.

Xander nods. “Call us *anytime*,” he adds, his voice firm.

“I called *him*, and that was already bad enough. I’ll be hearing about this forever,” I say, causing Clay to chuckle. “I didn’t want to wake you, though.”

“Clay, can I borrow your phone?” Xander asks, and he hands it over without hesitation.

Xander quickly types on the phone, then hands it back to Clay and takes out his own phone, typing on it before mine buzzes with an incoming text.

“That’s my number. Next time, you call me. I promise I won’t make you hear about it forever,” Xander says.

“Hey,” Clay chimes in.

“No, I’m sorry. I don’t even know you guys, I was just scared, and—”

Xander gently holds my chin with his thumb and forefinger, tilting my head up to him. “Just say, ‘Thank you, I will.’”

His intense gray eyes lock onto mine, and I feel my whole body wanting to comply and do whatever this beautiful man wants from me, so I say, “Thank you, I will.”

“Great, you broke her, babe,” Clay teases, and Xander releases his grip on me. “Anyway, Karen, it looks like we’ve got some time to kill because there’s no way in hell we’ll let you sit alone in a stairway all night. Tell us about yourself. What do you enjoy doing? Any hobbies?”

I turn my head from Xander to Clay. “I’m boring. I go to college, work, and sleep. Do you?”

“Now you’ve done it,” Xander whispers.

Clay grins at me. “Well, I do jump rope.”

I furrow my brow. “You’re kidding, right? Like ‘Down in the Valley?’ ”

“I wish he was,” Xander interjects, and as I look back at him, I notice the smile that tugs at the corner of his mouth.

“He’s just messing with you. He likes to watch when I do it. It’s not just plain jumping rope. I do the cool version with difficult steps to different songs,” Clay explains.

I turn my gaze back to him. “You lost me.”

“Wait,” he says, reaching for his phone again.

He opens YouTube and shows me videos of guys doing incredible jump rope routines to music. I have to admit, it looks pretty amazing, even though I’ll never admit that to Clay.

“And you can do that too?” I ask.

“Yes, he can. Even better,” Xander says, licking his lips, and I don’t miss the way his tone changes.

*Dio, is it hot in here?*

“Wait, let me show you some more,” Clay mumbles, fumbling with his phone.

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Someone gently shakes me, and my eyes snap open to see Clay looking amused.

“You’ve got some drool there, Karen,” he says, pointing to the side of my mouth.

I blink away the remnants of sleep, feeling cozy and warm. It takes a moment for me to remember that I’m in the truck with him and Xander.

When I look up, I realize I have been leaning on Xander, and he has his arm around me. It seems I fell asleep on him.

“Hey, Sleeping Beauty,” he says softly in his deep voice. “We didn’t know when you needed to get to college, so we thought we’d wake you and ask. If it’s too early, you can sleep some more.”

My consciousness slams back into my body at that moment, and I jerk away from him. “What time is it?”

“Six,” Clay replies.

“Fuck, I need to go,” I say. “Would you mind driving me home? I’m already late.”

“Sure, don’t worry,” Clay assures me, starting the truck and getting back on the road. “We can wait and drive you to college if you want?”

“*Dio*, no. You’ve already sat out here for hours while I drooled all over you,” I say, eager to escape the situation as quickly as possible.

“To be fair, you only drooled on Xander.” Clay snickers. “But I’m hurt that you fell asleep while I was showing you my not-boring hobby.”

I glance up at Xander, mumbling a quick “Sorry.”

He just huffs in response.

When Clay stops in front of my apartment complex, Xander gets out first. I turn to Clay, who says, “Promise me you’ll call if something like this ever happens again.”

“You mean my sweet little sister getting railed will be a more frequent occurrence now?” I ask, tone laced with sarcasm.

“Most definitely.” He smirks back before his face turns serious. “Promise me, if you feel unsafe, you’ll call.”

I nod, looking into his warm chocolate eyes. “Promise. Thank you,” I whisper before turning and sliding over the bench seat to exit.

I contemplate how to gracefully hop out when Xander takes a step closer, places his hands under my arms, and effortlessly lifts me out of the car as if I weigh nothing.

*Holy hotness.*

A tingling sensation spreads between my thighs, causing me to squeeze them together. Xander's gaze drifts down my body, and a slight smirk tugs at the corner of his mouth.

"See you around, Carolina," he says, getting back into the car.

They both wait until I'm safely inside before driving off, and the gesture does something I'm not ready to acknowledge.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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### **Carolina**

Fuck, I desperately need a nap or something. I stretch my neck, rotating my head from side to side. I'm so exhausted that I can't even think straight anymore.

Would it be unprofessional to ask Sophia for a break?

Of course, it would. Enduring classes was pure torture. And now, Sophia is rambling about her party on Sunday. I can barely keep my eyes open.

Leaning back in my desk chair, I let out a big yawn. The door opens, and Clay chuckles as he walks over to me, placing a to-go mug in front of me.

"Drink up. Looks like you need it," he says while Josh does the same for Sophia.

"Oh, I love you, Joshy. Thanks," she says before taking a sip.

I eye the mug skeptically but bring it to my lips. As I take a sip, I realize it's actually good coffee with just the right amount of sugar.

Josh talks to Sophia about the food for her birthday party while Clay leans in to speak softly to me. "How are you, Karen? Did you tear into your little sister when you got home?" he asks.

I huff. "Not yet, way too tired for that, so thank you for this," I say, gently shaking the to-go mug. "And thank you again for last night. I still feel bad, but I truly appreciate it."

He chuckles. “Oh, wow. Who would’ve thought that driving you around the city for a night would make the little kitty cat retract her claws.”

“That’s it. I don’t have the energy to pretend to like you today any longer,” I say, but I need to hide my smile behind my cup.

“Ouch,” he responds, his eyes filled with amusement. “Good, let’s get back to your charming self. It got a bit creepy there for a moment. However, you *do* owe me a favor for calling me out of bed last night.”

*And there it is.* I knew he would never just do something like that for me out of the goodness of his heart.

My tone turns icy as I ask, “What?”

“Come eat with us,” he says, his eyes challenging me.

I bite my lip. I don’t have any money to spend on food right now, and I don’t want to eat in front of them anyway. I’m starving. I skipped breakfast because I was in a rush and only had some old crackers left in my backpack. “Come on, Karen, you owe me.”

I push my chair back and stand, but he doesn’t move. I’m now standing right in front of him, having to tilt my head back to look him in the eyes. “Okay, but I’m not going to eat anything. I’m not hungry,” I lie. “I’ll just come and sit with you because you came for me ”

“That’s a good girl,” he says, pushing a strand of my hair behind my ear before turning to Josh and Sophia.

I’m left dumbstruck.

*What the hell was that? And why did it turn me on?*

“Let’s go eat, guys,” Clay says, and Sophia stands as well.

I grab my backpack and head toward the door when Josh rushes in front of me to hold it open. “You’re joining us?” he asks, smiling warmly as if he’s genuinely happy about it.

“I’m just going to sit with you guys. I’m not hungry, but yes,” I say.

“That’s great,” he says, walking closely beside me. “How are you liking your internship so far? Do you regret accepting my sister’s offer already?”

“Nope, not one bit. She’s great,” I say honestly, maybe a bit too loudly because she chuckles behind me.

“I sure am!”

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## Clay

We make our way to the cafeteria, and I am practically starving. “Thank God,” I mutter as we enter to find only a few people around. No need to wait in line this time. I turn to Carolina, asking, “What are you going to get?”

“Still nothing,” she replies, but I don’t push.

Yet as we navigate toward the food counter, where the aroma of food grows stronger, I hear a distinct rumble from her stomach. Glancing at her, I notice a blush creeping onto her cheeks.

*Why wouldn’t she get something if she was hungry?*

As she starts to fiddle with her backpack to get out a bottle of water, it suddenly dawns on me. I can’t believe what an idiot I’ve been, and on top of that, an absolute asshole. That fine took all her money over the weekend.

*How is she supposed to afford cafeteria food?*

“I’m thinking of going for fries. Do you like fries?” I ask her.

She gives me a puzzled look. “Sure, who doesn’t? Get whatever you want,” she says dismissively.

Sophia returns from the buffet with a salad bowl. “Want to wait at the table with me while they get theirs?” she asks Carolina, who agrees, and they head toward the register.

Josh walks over to me, making a face. “I know you told me I should eat more vegetables, but these look like they’ve

already been eaten once.”

“You’re such an idiot,” I say.

He looks at me, confused. “Okay, okay. I’ll get the goddamn vegetables.”

“No.” I huff. “I mean, we’re assholes. That fine took all her money over the weekend, and all week, we’ve been urging her to come eat with us. With what money?”

His eyes widen in realization. “Fuck.”

“Yeah, fuck,” I grumble, then turn to the cafeteria lady and ask for two servings of fries. When Josh stands next to me, I throw him a warning look. “Get those fucking vegetables.”

He rolls his eyes but complies, ordering some carrots to go with his chicken nuggets. “You’re worse than a toddler.” I scoff.

I settle down next to Carolina, placing the second plate of fries in front of her.

She glares at me, a frown creasing her forehead. “I told you, I don’t want anything.”

I simply shrug and start munching on my fries. “I know.”

*Fuck, I hate that these unhealthy fried sticks taste so good.*

Carolina glances at the others, who’ve already started eating. “I’m not going to eat that. I told you, I’m not hungry,” she grumbles, but her protest is betrayed by a loud rumble from her stomach.

I smile, trying to hide it with another bite of a fry. “Just eat them. I’m not going to negotiate with you over three-dollar fries.”

She crosses her arms over her chest, her eyes burning holes into me. “I’m not some charity case,” she murmurs, her voice barely above a whisper.

“I know you’re not,” I say. “It’s just fries. Now shut up and eat.”

Ignoring her, I start a conversation with Josh and Sophia about some movie we watched last Sunday and notice her taking a fry from her plate and putting it in her mouth in my peripheral vision.

*Good girl.*

After I finish my portion, she shoves her half-eaten plate toward me. I glance from the plate to her, confused. “What?”

“You can finish the rest. I’m done.” She shrugs, avoiding eye contact.

“How can you be done? More than half of it is still there,” I comment, tilting my head to her plate.

Her eyes suddenly meet mine, her gaze piercing. “What? Just because I’m fat, I can’t leave a plate unfinished?” she argues, her tone defensive.

I recoil slightly, taken aback by her implying that. “No, what the hell? I didn’t mean that at all. These are practically child-size portions. No one could be done after eating just half of it, not even the child it was intended for.” I frown at her. “Why would you think I would say something like that to you?”

She just shrugs and looks away. I thought we were forming some sort of friendship. Xander always says my sarcasm could come off as crass, but I thought I’d found someone who could give as good as she got in Carolina—a sort of unicorn. But now it seems as though I might have misread the situation entirely.

If Carolina thinks I would say something so cruel to her, then perhaps I’m not doing as well as I thought.

I had genuinely started to enjoy her company and thought she felt the same. But now, I’m left questioning if I’ve hurt her with my words.

*Maybe I need to be more careful with what I say in the future around her.*

Carolina digs through her backpack, pulling out the tattoo cream that Xander gave her for aftercare. Rolling up her

sleeve, she squeezes some cream onto her arm. I'm about to ask about the healing process, hoping to break the uncomfortable silence hanging over our table when Del Moro appears out of nowhere. He snatches the cream from her hands and squirts all its contents onto Carolina's chest.

Josh stands up so fast his chair falls over behind him. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"Here you go, Costa," Del Moro mocks, throwing the empty tube on the plate with the half-eaten fries. "Now you know what it's like to have a guy finish on you. If you ask nicely, I might even let you suck my dick, so your virgin ass could finally get a taste. Though, I'd have to shut my eyes." He looks her up and down with a slight tilt of his head. "Nope, I'd still know you're a fat bitch."

I leap to my feet now too. "The fuck, rookie?"

I'm ready to deck the guy, but Carolina stands as well, raising a finger to my face to stop me, never taking her eyes off the dickhead.

"I wouldn't even suck your lousy dick if I was suffocating and there was oxygen in your balls," she says, in her now familiar bored tone.

I almost choke on my own spit before I huff out a laugh.

Del Moro shoots me a nasty look before cracking a smirk. "You can give her lessons, Cooper. I heard you like sucking big dicks."

A surge of anger hits me. I know he's just trying to get to me, but I've had it with homophobic jerks, having dealt with them my entire life.

Carolina steps in front of me, practically shielding me, and I look down at the top of her head.

"Well, duh, but he sure wouldn't want to suck any small ones. Oh wait, did that just hurt your feelings?"

He hurls back something before storming off, but I can't make out what he says. I'm too busy processing what just happened. This firecracker of a girl just stood up for me. Aside

from Josh, Sophia, and Xander, no one else has ever defended me.

I wrap an arm around Carolina's shoulders and give her a squeeze, but she flinches, so I loosen my hold.

"You like me," I tease, dragging out the words in a singsong voice.

"Get off me," she says, stepping out of my hold.

"Admit it, you like me," I push teasingly.

Josh grins. "Let me get you some tissues for that," he offers, walking toward the counter.

Carolina glances down at the mess on her chest. "Fuck, what an asshole," she mumbles to herself.

When Josh returns, he stands next to Carolina and starts to clean off the cream. She looks at him, eyes wide, causing him to halt and realize where his hands were just moments ago. He turns bright red, quickly handing her the tissues.

"Here, s-sorry," he stutters before getting his chair back up and sitting beside Sophia, who's trying hard not to laugh.

Carolina manages to clean off most of the cream, but her black hoodie is still stained.

"I think I have some spare clothes in my desk if you need to change," Sophia offers.

Carolina gives her a skeptical look, "Thanks, but I think I'll have to pass."

Sophia winces as she realizes her offer wasn't quite thought out.

So I step in and offer, "I have one of Xander's hoodies in my locker. I could lend it to you." She doesn't move, and her expression remains the same. "I mean, since we like each other now, Karen, we can share my boyfriend's clothes. I'm good at sharing," I tease with a smirk, but she just pins me with a blank stare.

"What I absolutely do not like is you calling me that shitty name. But no, thank you, I can manage."

“You’re right. Friends don’t use fake names. They use pet names.”

*I need to think of one.*

“Oh *Dio*, please let this day end,” she mumbles, looking up at the ceiling and placing a hand over her eyes.

Then, I catch a glimpse of her tattoo, where her hoodie sleeve is still rolled up. “Should I ask Xander for some more cream for you? I could bring it tomorrow,” I offer.

She lowers her hand and pulls down her sleeve. “I can’t afford it right now, but thanks,” she responds tersely.

“I’m sure Xander would just give you—” I start.

“Stop talking, or I am going to hurt you.” She glares at me.

“I’m just going to text Xander,” I say, going to pull out my phone, but before I can do that, I feel a sharp pang. “Ouch! Did you just pinch my nipple?” I ask, completely taken aback, noticing Carolina trying to conceal her smile. “She just pinched me, Josh! That’s assault on a police officer!” I pretend to frown at her.

Looking over at Josh and Sophia, I see they’re both smiling.

“In her defense, she did warn you.” Josh shrugs, gesturing with a nugget in his hand.

“I’m not going to let you take stuff from him. He works hard for his money too,” she states, crossing her arms over her chest.

Josh nods. “He sure does,” he agrees, taking a bite of his nugget.

“I bet Xander would rather know that one of his favorite pieces is healing properly than keep an extra tube of cream in his inventory,” I remark, dismissing the issue.

“What? I didn’t think he even liked it,” Carolina comments, looking puzzled.

“No, he loves it. It’s one of the most unique and beautiful pieces he’s done so far,” Josh says, and I notice Carolina’s lips

curl up ever so slightly.

Checking her watch, she grabs her backpack. “I have to rush if I want to change before my shift. Is that okay?” She glances at Sophia, looking concerned.

“Of course, no problem. See you tomorrow.” Sophia waves her goodbye, and I watch Carolina hastily leave the cafeteria.

“We have to do something about that asshole. There is no way I’m going to let him treat her like this,” Josh grumbles, taking a sip out of his water bottle.

“Agreed.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

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### **Carolina**

Today, for breakfast, I made scrambled eggs. It's Chiara's favorite, and I figure it would be a good way to start a conversation with her.

I don't want to talk to her about it, though. I mean, what am I supposed to tell her about relationships? And how unbelievable does everything sound coming from me? I'm her older sister who hasn't even been kissed, while she seems to have more experience already.

She comes out of the bathroom, avoiding eye contact. We haven't really spoken to each other since it happened. It seems like she's embarrassed as hell. I need to change that and make her feel good again.

We've already drifted apart enough.

"Here, *piccola*. Your favorite," I say gently, placing a plate in front of her.

"*Grazie*," she says, still not meeting my eyes or making any move to start eating.

"We need to talk, Chiara. I'm not mad about what happened. I know you're responsible and smart. You're being careful, and you can decide what you want to do with your body. You're old enough," I state, trying to be supportive and hoping to keep her from getting defensive.

She glances up at me, sitting up straighter. "I am," she says.

“And, because you’re smart, old enough, and responsible, do you see why this situation was problematic?” I ask.

She nods. “It was dumb of me to bring him here. Roberto is dangerous, and it wasn’t respectful toward you. I’m sorry.”

My eyebrows shoot up to my hairline. She understands what irritated me and even washed the linens yesterday.

“That’s all I wanted to hear. Thank you,” I say, reaching out to squeeze her hand.

“So, was that your first time I ruined, or...” I trail off, curious.

She snorts. “No.”

*Okay then.* “That was Leo, right? Or did I miss something?”

“No, it’s Leo,” she says dreamily, her eyes lighting up.

“So, it’s official and exclusive now?” I inquire, and she beams at me.

“Yes, he asked me to be his girlfriend that night.”

“I’m happy for you,” I tell her, and I genuinely am. I want her to be happy, even if it’s with that boy.

“We have some time. Do you want to tell me about him?” I ask, truly interested.

She beams at me before she launches into a monologue about how sweet and good-looking he is, what a great kisser he is, and how he has her picture as his phone background. She tells me he holds her hand in front of his friends, and I listen intently, realizing that I haven’t been asking about her life enough for the past few months.

A familiar feeling starts to creep in. It’s a feeling I’ve tried to suppress, especially when it comes to my younger sister.

Jealousy.

I shouldn’t feel this way.

My gaze drops to my hands. She’s my sister. I should be happy for her, and I am truly happy she is happy. But I can’t

help but compare myself to Chiara.

*Why does it seem like she has everything I've ever wanted?*

I take a deep breath, trying to push the bad feelings away. I know it's not fair to her. After all, she has her own struggles. I can't let my insecurities get in the way of our relationship. It's already stained enough since I'm always focusing on her health, safety, and homework, but I haven't asked about what's happening in her life lately.

*I need to change that.*

Chiara is going through this shit show with me too, all while navigating the life of a teenager. She seems to handle it much better than I did, but I silently vow to be a better big sister. Chiara needs that just as much as she needs me to take care of everything else.

---

With hopes that Sophia has some updates on my parents' case, I settle into my desk chair at the lab, but again, she disappoints me.

"This stuff takes time sometimes." She shrugs. "But it doesn't mean we won't get it."

I nod, trying to be patient. I waited five years. I can wait a little longer.

We shift our focus to another case, allowing my mind to be occupied for a while.

A couple hours later, I'm so engrossed in my work at the lab table that I don't even notice the guys entering the room until there's a soft tap on my shoulder. I turn and peer up into Josh's dark eyes.

"Hey, sorry but you didn't hear me," he says.

I glance around and see Clay and Sophia chatting at her desk in the back of the room.

“Are you going to join us for dinner again today?” Josh asks, redirecting my attention back to him.

“No, I think I’ll just finish this,” I reply, not wanting another incident like yesterday.

“Is it me?” He laughs, but his eyes carry a hint of hurt. “I ask you every day, and yet when Clay asked you once, you came?”

Shit, that sounds bad. “It’s really not you. He bribed me,” I tell him, hoping he understands.

“Hmm... I have nothing to bribe you with, but you know, I’m not opposed to kneeling in front of you,” he says, letting his finger trail down my forearm, a mischievous smirk on his lips.

Images of him kneeling before me, with both of us wearing much less clothing, flood my mind, and I have to clear my throat before I can respond.

*He’s just kidding. A guy like him would never want a girl like me.*

“No need to kneel. I’ll come without you kneeling. I mean, I’ll come with you guys,” I blurt out, stumbling over my words, my face turning as red as a tomato.

His smirk transforms into a genuine smile, those damn dimples laughing at me.

I need to create some distance between us, so I walk over to my desk, remove my coat and gloves, and grab my backpack. Josh is already waiting by the door, and we’re joined by the others as we head out.

As we walk, Josh speaks quietly. “If you don’t want to go to the cafeteria because of Del Moro, I could talk to him. He’s a rookie and shouldn’t be bringing that kind of behavior to the workplace. He’s a fucking cop. He should be protecting people, not bullying them.”

My head turns sharply toward him. “No!” I blurt out, and he furrows his brows. I continue in a much softer voice, “Please don’t talk to him. I know from experience that

involving other people will only make the situation worse. I can handle it on my own.”

He doesn't seem entirely convinced, but he nods. “If you say so.”

We enter the cafeteria, and I stick by Sophia as she grabs herself a veggie sandwich. Then we head to the table that seems to be their usual spot and sit.

Clay sits next to me, placing two plates in front of us. I'm already getting angry, but he interrupts me before I can say anything. “Shh... calm down. It's not from me, it's from Xander,” he says. I glance down at the plate filled with potato hash, carrots, peas, and a chicken breast, noting Clay has the same food on his plate. “He told me to buy you dinner because he has a proposition for you,” Clay continues, smirking.

I'm hungry, and the food looks healthy, so no one can say the fat girl eats crap again. Plus, they didn't say anything yesterday when I ate in front of them. I take a bite of the potato hash, which turns out to be super delicious.

“So, Xander wants to know what you're doing tomorrow,” Clay begins as I continue eating.

“Why?” I ask, my tone laced with suspicion.

“He has a big back piece scheduled for tomorrow. Usually, he avoids scheduling major pieces on Saturdays since it's the busiest day for calls and walk-ins. Normally, he pauses his work to handle clients, but with this particular piece, he'd rather not. He wants to know if you're available to help him out, answering the phone and greeting walk-ins so he can focus on the client. In exchange, he'll give you the premium tattoo cream,” Clay says.

“What time would he need me?” I ask.

“The shop is open from nine to five on Saturdays,” Clay states, returning his attention to his dinner.

I think about it. I have work in the evening and some studying, but I'm sure I can bring my laptop and study during the lulls when no one calls or walks in. I get that this is a cheap trick to get me my cream without just pushing it on me

for free. But my tattoo is becoming itchier by the hour, and that cream would be a relief. Besides, as Clay said, if Xander needs to concentrate on his client, it's not like he'll be there by my side chatting for hours. And if he really needs some help, I can do this for him. After all, he came for me too.

"Sure, tell him I'll be there at nine," I say, focusing on my plate.

"Great! He'll love that, kitten. You're saving his ass," Clay says.

"Kitten?" I glance at him.

"Yes, kitten. You're like a black, feisty little kitty cat. Rawr," he teases, forming claws with his hand.

"Oh my God, that's just embarrassing," Sophia mutters.

"I don't know if I prefer that to Karen," I say flatly.

"You do because best friends call each other pet names." He wiggles his eyebrows at me.

"Sure, *Clay*," I say, making him laugh.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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### **Carolina**

Darkened Dermis is still closed with no lights on when I arrive ten minutes early.

I'm nervous. It's not about handling the customers. I'm confident I can do that. What makes me nervous is spending hours with Xander. I don't know him, even though he has been nice to me the few times I've seen him.

I've gotten to know Clay a little, and I trust that he wouldn't have a boyfriend who is an asshole, but still, I worry that things might get awkward or uncomfortable. Hopefully, Xander really will be occupied with his client the entire time.

I wait a few more minutes, peering into the windows and admiring the artwork on display. Xander's talent is truly remarkable. Then, at nine fifteen, a black Ford, which I recognize as Xander's, parks in the reserved spot in front of the shop.

He gets out, looking incredibly grumpy, and my stomach twists with anxiety.

*Did Clay set me up? Did he arrange this without Xander's consent? Fuck.*

Xander mutters a brief "Morning" and opens the shop, quickly disappearing inside. I manage to slip through the door just before it closes on me.

He heads into the room on the right side of the shop, and I stand there, uncertain if I should take off my jacket. "Fuck," he

growls out from the room, and I quickly make my way over, peeking inside. He has taken off his jacket, and his tight white T-shirt is stained with blood on his left shoulder.

I drop my backpack and swiftly get out of my jacket, hurrying over to him. “What happened?” I ask, concern filling my voice.

“I was fixing stuff under the car and accidentally pulled out something sharp that fell on my shoulder,” he says, words strained.

“Do we need to get you to the hospital? Should I call Clay?” I ask, worried, but he shakes his head.

“No, it’s just a small cut. It hurts like hell, though,” he says.

“Show me,” I say, assuming he will just pull over the collar of his shirt to let me see the wound on his shoulder. Instead, to my surprise, he pulls the shirt over his head, baring his chest and all his tattoos. I find myself momentarily stunned, unable to tear my eyes away until I notice a small line of blood trickling from his shoulder.

“Do you have more light outside?” I ask, and he nods.

We make our way to the tattoo stool, and I bring my backpack.

“Sit down,” I instruct, assuming he will take a seat on the tattoo chair. But he sits on the small stool with wheels he uses while tattooing. This places us at eye level, and I notice he is even more beautiful from this angle. I get my first-aid kit from my backpack and open it, grabbing the necessary items to clean the wound.

I stand in front of him, uncertain about how to do this, but he spreads his knees, inviting me to step between them so I can get closer to inspect the wound. His breath brushes against my neck, sending a shiver through my entire body.

The cut doesn’t appear deep, but the surrounding area is red and has a faint bluish sheen. “It hit that spot with force,” I note, and he nods. “This is going to suck balls. I’m sorry,” I apologize before preparing the solution to clean the wound. As

I clean it, he hisses and grips my upper arm tightly. “I’m sorry, but this needs to be done so you don’t get an infection. And you’ll need to hold onto something else, or I won’t be able to work here,” I tell him with a smile.

He nods, and his large hands move to the back of my thighs, gripping them. The touch sends butterflies through me, but I try my best to appear unaffected as I continue disinfecting his wound. He hisses again and tightens his grip, his fingers pressing firmly into my thighs. I work as quickly as possible, not only to hurry this for him but to create some space between us.

When I think the wound is clean enough, I apply some gauze and lean back, still feeling his hands on me. “I’ve cleaned it, but it will hurt for a while. Do you want some pain meds?” I ask, glancing over at the first-aid kit resting on the nearby silver table and leaning in to grab the chocolate I keep there. “Or chocolate?” I suggest.

“Chocolate?” He huffs, sounding skeptical.

“Chocolate helps with pain. Or at least, I think so. I mean, chocolate helps with everything and makes everything better.”

*Fuck, I’m rambling.*

His mouth twists into a half-smile. “Pain meds would be great if you have it. I think I’ll need a bit more than chocolate to get through a whole day of tattooing.”

I nod, grabbing a tablet that melts on your tongue. “Open,” I say, and Xander obeys while giving me a look.

I place it on his tongue and wait a moment before he scrunches up his face.

“That is gross.”

I open the piece of chocolate and offer it to him, a smile on my face. “Open,” I say again, and he complies, humor sparking in his eyes while I feed him the chocolate.

“Smart.” His smirk mirrors mine. “Thank you,” he says, squeezing my thighs once more.

I need to look away, as his gray eyes have a way of flustering me. So, I divert my gaze down to his chest, which isn't any better. His pecs are a masterpiece, with tattoos and pierced nipples. On his left side, just over his heart, he has *CLAY* tattooed, and the letters look like they are illuminated, reminding me that Xander is a dream come true but not meant for me to dream about.

If only my body would take the hint. I have to swallow hard before stepping back and breaking free of his hold. Then my eyes land on the black shading on his other pec. It looks like a black hole amidst his other tattoos. Curiosity gets the better of me, and I blurt out, "Did you have to cover something up there?" I realize that it's a personal question instantly and look at him with wide eyes. "I mean, you don't have to tell me. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—"

"Did you know that in some cultures, they believe the left side of your chest is where your heart lies, and the right is where your soul lives?" he questions, his voice softening.

I shake my head. "No, I didn't know that. It's beautiful to think about things like that. But what does it have to do with..." I pause as realization dawns on me. "You think your soul is black?"

"The abyss," he responds, standing, causing me to tilt my head upward to meet his gaze. "I'm going to change real quick. My client for today should be coming in a few minutes, and I have to sanitize the space again."

---

## **Xander**

Carolina is in the final phase of sanitizing the tattoo station when I step out of my office, pulling on the spare black shirt I keep in there. She's got gloves on and is doing a solid job.

"Did you learn to do that from watching me?" I ask, startling her as I stand behind her. "Sorry," I quickly add, not meaning to scare her.

“I picked it up when you were doing mine.” She shrugs, but her attentiveness is impressive.

I glance at the clock, noting my client is due any minute. “Sorry, but we’ve gotta speed through the tasks I need you to handle before my appointment shows up,” I tell her.

“No problem.” She quickly removes her gloves, tossing them in the trash.

We get to the front, where I introduce her to the desktop computer. “The password’s CC0818. This is my calendar. If someone comes in looking for an appointment, you’ve gotta check here first to see if I’m free and then ask them what they want. I usually only do small tattoos on Saturdays, while larger pieces are reserved for Tuesday through Friday. Sundays and Mondays are my days off.” As I’m explaining, she fetches a notepad and pen from the counter to jot down notes.

“You know my style. If a design doesn’t match my aesthetic, I won’t tattoo it, and you can let them know right away. All else, it’s just about setting up an appointment. They have to send me their idea using the form on the website, and I’ll confirm the date and design later tonight after I’m done with my client.”

She gives me a nod. “Okay, got it.”

“If you have any questions or need me, come and ask,” I tell her. “But try to keep it to a minimum, as I’ll need to focus on this design today.”

“Understood,” she says, her face serious.

I bite my lip to keep from smiling. *She’s definitely taking this seriously.*

I can manage things on my own. I’ve done it for years, mainly because I’m not great with people hanging around. They tend to bug me or get too loud for my liking. I prefer working in peace or with music playing. Yes, it’d be nice not to have to break my concentration to handle walk-ins or answer phone calls, but I’d take that any day over having someone who isn’t a client in my space.

When Clay mentioned the cream incident, I knew she'd never accept a free handout. I grew up poor and understand the feeling of having things just given to you. She wants to earn her way. I respect that. And the few times I've interacted with her, she's been nice to be around.

The door dings, and my client comes in. He's a big gym guy, almost as tall as me, and huge. His broad back will take hours to tattoo, and I'm pumped.

"Hey, X," he greets, shaking my hand before pulling me into a hug and patting my back hard.

I have to hold my breath to stifle a grunt as pain flares up in my shoulder. Carolina did a good job patching me up, but it still stings.

*I need my emotional support thighs.*

"Ready?" I ask, but his gaze is locked on Carolina.

"Hey," she greets, giving him a smile.

It's not genuine, more like a courteous customer service façade.

"Hey there," he replies, resting his elbows on the counter and bending toward her. "And who are you, shorty?"

His tone is a bit too flirty for my taste, so I give him a slap on the bicep. "Definitely not your next lay. Let's go. We don't have all day."

He chuckles and gives her a wink before following me to the back.

We make some small talk before I start the tattoo, and a few minutes in, the phone rings.

"Darkened Dermis, Carolina speaking, how can I help you?"

I smile to myself. My usual response is a simple "Hello," but I guess that works too.

I eavesdrop on her side of the conversation, and she's handling it like a pro.

About twenty minutes later, some people walk in looking for an appointment, and Carolina manages it all smoothly. She's friendlier than I've ever seen her. With her in control, I can finally tune out the distractions and focus on the tattoo.

---

Hours must have passed, given how my neck feels.

I've lost track of time, lost in my work. Setting the tattoo gun aside to stretch and crack my neck, I stand, needing a break.

"Here, you should hydrate," Carolina says, handing me a water bottle from the refrigerator in my office.

"Your little helper is a godsend, Xander. I need a break," Jonah says.

"Sure," I mutter as he gets up to use the restroom, already familiar with the place from previous tattoos.

"This is looking good," Carolina says, looking at Jonah's retreating back.

I glance at the clock. It's already two, and now that I'm out of the zone, I realize how hungry I am.

"Would you mind grabbing us some subs from the place two doors down? You can use the cash in the register," I ask her as Jonah returns.

"Jonah, what kind of sub?" I ask him.

"Cheese, please."

"All right, two cheese subs and whatever you want. Thanks," I tell her.

She nods and grabs her jacket on the way out.

As she leaves, I find my gaze following her perfect round ass. When I look up, I see Jonah doing the same.

"Off-limits," I warn him, knowing he's a fucking player.

"Oh, come on, you tapping that?" he asks.

“I’m not, but she’s still off-limits.” I grunt.

“So, you *want* to tap that,” he teases.

*Sure, I do, but that’s not the point.* “No, she’s a friend,” I say, getting agitated.

“*Suuure,*” is all he says.

Carolina returns with the subs, wishing us a “*Buon appetito,*” before heading back behind the counter with no food for herself in sight.

We devour the subs, and I dive back into my work. It’s nearly five when I finally finish, and Carolina hasn’t interrupted me once. The last time I worked this peacefully was when the shop was closed, and I did a piece after hours.

I clean and patch up Jonah and walk him over to the register, where Carolina steps aside to give me room to check him out. He leaves with a “See you soon” aimed at Carolina, which earns a huff from her once he’s gone.

Her customer service mask slips away, replaced by her usual bored expression.

I glance down at a notepad on the counter. It’s a sketch of a tea bag with a winking face and heart pattern, and around it, the text reads *Feeling a little naugh-tea.*

I chuckle, turning to look at her. When she realizes what I’m looking at, she rushes over to snatch the notepad from me, but I lift it over her head, which isn’t very high at all.

“What’s this?” I ask.

“I need to get a gift for Sophia tomorrow, and I know she loves those corny mugs. But I can’t afford to buy her one. So, I thought of making one myself, but I don’t know... it’s probably silly and a bad idea,” she mumbles, her eyes downcast and a blush creeping up her cheeks.

“Hey,” I say, gently lifting her chin with my thumb and forefinger to make her look at me. “It’s the perfect gift and a nice idea. She will love it. It’s cute and cool.”

*Just like you.*

She nods, and I release her, handing back her notepad. She checks her phone and moves over to her backpack. “I’m sorry, I have to go, or I’ll be late for my shift at the bar.”

“Hold up,” I say, fetching the tattoo cream I promised from the back and fifty dollars from the register. “Here, thanks for your help today.”

She accepts the cream but refuses the money, thanking me and turning to leave. I catch her shoulder, and she flinches with a hiss, so I pull back immediately.

*What the fuck?* “Carolina—”

“We agreed on the cream. I didn’t do anything today to deserve the money. I was just hanging out and studying. The phone barely rang but maybe a dozen times, and there were maybe the same number of walk-ins. It’s not a big deal. I wanted to help you.”

Clay had told me about the fine that took a lot of money from her when they picked up her little sister for underage drinking—perhaps all she had. Yet here she is, refusing the money she definitely earned today.

“Take it, Carolina. If it wasn’t for the cream, I would give you a hundred dollars for today. This was one of the most relaxed Saturdays I’ve had in a while. You earned it.”

She looks at the money, clearly uncertain. I step closer, open her free hand, and place the money inside, gently closing her fingers around it. “Now say, ‘Thank you, I’ll be back next Saturday to help you again.’”

She looks up at me with wide eyes, hesitating. I raise my eyebrows, prompting her. “Thank you. I’ll be back next Saturday,” she replies in a whisper.

“Good girl. See you tomorrow,” I say, and she exits the shop so fast that I can’t help but chuckle as the door swings shut behind her.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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### **Carolina**

Yesterday felt like it stretched on forever. After the full day of work at Darkened Dermis, it was straight to a bustling Saturday night at the bar.

It wasn't the long day that got to me. I'm pretty used to that.

It was more about the anticipation, I guess. Ever since Clay brought up working for Xander, I had been wound up tighter than a spring.

Then there's Xander and the way he works. It's something else. Seeing him pour so much passion and talent into what he does is almost soothing. There's a certain calm that just sort of radiates from him. Being in that kind of atmosphere was good for my soul. That's why I said yes to working for him again next Saturday.

*So not because of the sexy-as-fuck demanding way he told me to. Nah-uh.*

And my 'work' there, if you can even call it that, is super easy. A few phone calls, a couple of people walking in, a little dusting here and there.

Most of the time, I just sat there and studied or brainstormed about what to get Sophia for her birthday. And well, that brings me back to the present moment.

It's Sunday afternoon, and I'm just finishing her gift. I found this old rose mug in our cupboard, still in great

condition. It could count as vintage. Chiara had some leftover markers from her school project, which work on ceramic, so I drew the winking tea bag with the ‘naugh-tea’ pun I sketched yesterday on the mug. I think it turned out cute, and it suits Sophia.

I put it in a cardboard box, drawing little tea bags on it. I don’t have any gift wrapping, so I use an old newspaper instead. On top, I write ‘*Happy Birthday, Sophia,*’ in big letters. It’s not perfect, but I do my best, hoping she’ll like it.

*It’s the thought that counts, right?*

I grab my jeans and Henley and head into the bathroom. Then, I brush and style my hair, making it look shiny, and apply more makeup than usual, tinting my lips with a dark berry shade. When I look at myself in the mirror, I start to get excited. This is the first birthday party or get-together I’ve been invited to since middle school.

*Maybe I’m even going to like it.*

---

## **Xander**

With all the late shifts they are doing lately, I rarely see my boy. And now I have to spend one of our family Sundays with other people instead of balls deep inside him.

I move my hand up to Clay’s neck, applying gentle pressure and tilting his head a little to deepen our kiss. I nibble on his lower lip, and he lets out a soft whimper. This stirs something inside me, and I feel myself getting harder, my jeans becoming uncomfortably tight. I bring my other hand to his crotch, squeezing his bulge and groaning into his mouth.

Pressing my forehead against his, I whisper, “You’re such a good boy, always so responsive.” I give him another squeeze over his jeans, and I imagine how his toes are curling up.

“Fuck, babe, there are people waiting inside for us.” He nearly moans.

We are sitting in my car in the covered parking lot beside the house, just returning from getting more champagne. He gives me his bedroom eyes, and I can't resist him.

Shielded by walls on the left and right, no one will see me suck my boy's cock real quick. "I don't give a fuck who's waiting," I tell him, although I admit I'm kind of excited to see Carolina again.

I can't help but wonder if she'd be just as pliant as my boy. *Will she whimper and moan just for me like he does?*

The thought gets me even harder, and I open Clay's jeans, my hand slipping inside his boxers and finding his perfect thick cock, giving it a squeeze.

"Xander," he moans out my name, letting his head fall back to the headrest and closing his eyes.

I start to pump his cock, hard and fast, how he likes it, while kissing and nibbling up his neck.

"As soon as those people are gone, I am going to spend the rest of the night in your tight little asshole with my tongue, my fingers, and my cock. Fucking you until you can't take any more and beg me to stop," I whisper against his skin.

"As if I ever begged you for anything other than to fuck me harder," he remarks, and I huff a laugh before biting down on his neck.

"You little brat, now shut up and come in my mouth," I say, leaning down and taking him deep.

"Fuck..." He huffs, his hands finding the door and my hair, gripping both.

I suck him hard, letting my tongue circle the head of his cock, nibbling on it and making him whimper. I hollow out my cheeks while I suck him in again, his hands in my hair gripping tighter, and the slight pain makes me groan around his cock.

After just a few more pumps of my fist and some circles with my tongue, Clay releases down my throat, making me swallow all of it.

When he comes down from his high, I sit up, taking his head in both hands and bringing his lips to mine, kissing him deeply once more.

“Light of my life,” I say.

“Love of mine,” he answers, panting slightly.

I give him one more peck before shifting his cock back inside his jeans and zipping him up.

Looking down at my own bulge in my jeans, I groan. “We have to stop doing this all the time before we have to be somewhere. This will take ages to go back down.”

Clay chuckles. “Do you want me to take care of it?” he asks, reaching for my zipper.

I grab his wrist and bring his palm to my mouth, kissing it gently before pulling on his wrist to bring him closer to me, gazing into his beautiful chocolate eyes. “No, the only place I am going to come today is inside you.”

“It would still be inside me if you’d let me suck you off.” He smirks.

“Stop it, brat, or this will take even longer,” I say, letting go of him, my head falling back.

I need a minute before we go inside. I’m not sure walking is possible at the moment.

After a minute of silence, he asks, “So, crazy weather today, right?”

I look at him, my eyebrow raised, and we both chuckle.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

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### **Carolina**

Sophia's house is one of the prettiest I've ever seen, but it's not a single house. It's a duplex. Both doors, one on the left and one on the right, are white and charming. On one side, there's a cute welcome sign while the other door remains bare.

I step onto the porch with Sophia's gift in hand and examine the doorbells, only to find that both have 'Lee' written on them.

*Does Sophia own both sides of the duplex? Or is one of them her parents' place?*

*Which doorbell should I ring?*

The whole situation fills me with anxiety, and I'm tempted to just turn around and head back home. It's cold outside, and the wind cuts through my leather jacket. It looks like it might snow soon.

"Fuck it," I mutter to myself, planning on texting Sophia that something came up or making up an excuse. Just as I'm about to walk away, heading back down the street toward the subway station, I hear car doors opening and closing.

Clay's voice echoes through the air. "Kitten! Where the fuck do you think you're going?"

I freeze in my tracks and turn around, spotting Clay and Xander a few steps away.

"The party's this way," Clay says, pointing to the door without the welcome sign.

I walk over to them and nod to Xander, who holds two champagne bottles in one hand and dips his chin to me in greeting.

Clay wraps an arm around my shoulder, pulling me close to his side. “Look at us, spending a Sunday together like the best friends we are,” he says with a smirk.

I simply huff in response. Xander walks up to the door before us and opens it, and as we walk in, we’re greeted by muffled music and laughter.

“We’re home!” Clay yells while Xander helps me take off my backpack and jacket.

As soon as I have it off, Clay nudges me down the hallway to a big open kitchen and living room, where some people are sitting on an oversized U-shaped couch and others sit on bar stools at the kitchen island where Sophia and Josh are standing. There are only maybe ten people here, but I am already uncomfortable and steeling myself.

The house is open and beautiful, though.

“Look what the cat dragged in! A little kitten,” Clay says, smirking down at me. I glare at him. “Oh, don’t be a mean little kitty. We are here to party,” he says, reaching out to boop my nose, but I take a step to the side.

“I am not as mean as I could be right now. You should be grateful for that,” I warn in a soft tone, not wanting others to overhear it, but I hear a chuckle behind me.

When I turn, Josh is smiling down at me with his stupid dimples. “Hey, so glad you could make it,” he says, pulling me into a hug.

I am so stunned I freeze against his chest, my cheek pressed against his soft, gray sweater. He smells like a mix of cinnamon and other spices. It is delicious.

He swipes his hand down the back of my head along my hair before he releases me, stepping back just as Sophia comes sweeping in and nearly crushes me. “You came! Yes! Now the party can start,” she exclaims, happily giggling.

“Happy Birthday,” I say shyly, and she smiles at me.

“Happy Birthday to you too. I hope you’re down for cake because I baked a lot.”

“Sure,” I say, already realizing that I won’t escape without at least trying some of her cakes.

Taking a quick look around, I notice that the rest of the people have already resumed their conversations. Only Xander, Josh, Clay, and Sophia are focused on me, so I seize the opportunity and hand my present to Sophia. “This is for you. It’s just something silly and small, but yeah. Thank you for inviting me,” I whisper in a rush.

Sophia beams at me. “Can I open it?”

“Sure,” I say, but before the word is fully out of my mouth, she’s already tearing off the newspaper wrapping. When she discovers the cardboard box with the tea bags on it, she looks up at me and grins.

“Did you draw them?” I nod. “This is so fucking cool.” She opens the box and reaches in to grab the mug. Pulling it out and looking at it, she throws her head back and laughs.

“What is it?” Clay asks, curious.

Sophia holds out the mug to him.

Xander glances at it, then meets my gaze. His lips curl in amusement before he dips his chin at me, and that alone makes me blush.

“Kitten is an artist. Look at that,” Clay comments.

“That’s awesome. You’re good,” Josh comments, smiling at me.

“It’s nothing,” I defuse. “But I thought you could never have enough mugs.”

“Oh, that’s for sure,” Sophia agrees, grabbing me again and pulling me into a tight hug. “Thank you so much. I love it,” she whispers while still holding me tightly. “I’ve got something for you too.”

My eyes widen. “No, Sophia, my birthday was last week. That’s not—”

She shoves an envelope into my hands and grins. “Open it.”

I bite my lip but gently open the envelope, making sure not to rip anything. As I take out the card, I see that it’s a coupon for getting my nails done. I’ve never done that before, but I know it can be expensive.

“Sophia, I...” I begin, feeling overwhelmed.

“I thought we could make a whole day out of it. Get some tea, get our nails done, maybe go out for a few drinks and dinner after. So, it’s not just a coupon. It’s like a gift for a day with me, all expenses covered,” she explains, her smile warm.

“That’s too much,” I say, looking down at the envelope.

No one has ever given me such an expensive present. We weren’t as poor as we are now when my parents were still alive, but there would have never been enough money to spare for something like this.

“No, it’s not. Honestly, it’s mostly selfish because I want to have such a day with you. Look at it like a present I made for myself, and I just roped you into it,” she says, trying to reassure me.

I bite my lip, torn. I don’t want to be rude, but this is too much. I can’t simply accept it. It feels like she’s spending way too much money on me.

*Did the guys tell her about how I was searching my backpack for dollar bills the other night?*

A big, warm hand lands on my shoulder, and I look up into understanding gray eyes. “It’s not for you. It’s for her. You can take it and make her happy. Say, ‘thank you,’ ” Xander whispers into my ear.

I nod ever so slightly and manage to say, “Thank you.”

Sophia squeals with joy and hugs me again, twirling us around as she swings left and right. But even in that moment, my gaze drifts over her shoulder to Xander.

*Why is it that letting him take control makes my life so much easier?*

It's as if my anxiety evaporates, and my soul feels safe when he takes the reins.

Clay grabs Xander's head and brings it down to his lips, kissing him. They smile at each other when they pull back, and I'm reminded that I have to get rid of this little crush as quickly as possible.

Xander and Clay engage Sophia in a conversation, leaving me standing next to Josh, who appears nervous. "You okay?" I ask as he is usually the calmest of all.

"Sure, well, I have something for you too," he says, rubbing his neck.

I furrow my brows. "You do?"

He smiles and places a hand on my lower back, guiding me to the other end of the living room. There, on a hutch, I notice two vases filled with flowers—one with lilies and the other with an assortment of flowers in various colors.

He takes the vase with the different flowers and offers it to me. I take it, gazing down at the stunning arrangement. Having so many different flowers together shouldn't work, but it's a harmonious burst of colors and undeniably beautiful.

"It's twenty-two stems for your twenty-second birthday. I didn't know what your favorite flowers are, but I thought, why should you have to choose when I can give you all of them?" he explains, his dimples nearly melting me.

*Why is he so handsome?*

*Why are all of them so handsome?*

And now he's considerate and kind too, buying me flowers? No one has bought me flowers before, and this incredibly sweet gesture is the most thoughtful gift I've ever been given. I bite my lip, my nose tingling and my eyes welling up.

"You don't like them," Josh states, noticing my reaction.

My eyes shoot up to meet his sorrowful gaze. “No! I love them. Thank you,” I say, gently touching a pink rose with my fingertips.

“You’re into roses? I need to know so I can buy you the right ones next time.” He grins.

My heart flutters. *Next time?* “No, my favorite flowers are these. If you want to buy me flowers, please let them be exactly like this,” I whisper.

“All right, just twenty-three stems next year.” He chuckles, reaching out to tuck a stray strand of hair behind my ear that had fallen into my face.

*Can it be? Is he flirting with me?*

We share a brief moment of locked gazes until Clay interrupts, yelling, “Cake!”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

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### Clay

“What kind of cakes did you make?” I ask Sophia, pulling Xander into a side hug.

As I gaze outside through the glass garden door, I notice that it has started to snow. Thick flakes gracefully descend, covering everything in a pristine white blanket. I’ve always loved it when it snows. It has a way of transforming the world, making everything so incredibly beautiful.

“Chocolate, red velvet, and pumpkin cream pie,” she says, pointing toward the kitchen where the cakes are displayed.

“Ugh.” I let out a sigh, tilting my head back. “I’ll never escape that one, will I?” I ask, exasperated.

Xander leans down and plants a kiss on my temple before letting out a chuckle. “Pumpkin cream pie is the best pie ever invented,” he says, amusement evident in his voice.

I lean away from him, shaking my head. “Nah-uh, it’s the bane of my existence.”

“No birthday of mine without a pumpkin cream pie,” Sophia singsongs.

“No...” I point a finger at her, “... pumpkin pie should not be turned into a damn cream pie. It’s a crime against nature.”

“You little drama queen, it’s not. Your mom sure knew how to bake,” Sophia remarks.

“She sure did.” Xander pulls me into a tight hug.

*Fuck, I miss her.*

As I step back, I notice Carolina and Josh standing in front of each other. She holds a bouquet of flowers, and he gently tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. The chemistry between them is practically visible, sparks flying in the air. Sophia jumps slightly when I yell a moment later.

“Cake!” I make my way over to the kitchen, where the cakes are on display. “Who wants some? Babe, which one do you want?” I ask Xander, glancing out of the corner of my eye to see Josh and Carolina walking over to us.

“Do you really have to ask?” Xander whispers in my ear, his hands finding their way to my waist.

“I’m not going to kiss you after you’ve eaten that,” I state.

“You’re such a little brat,” he whispers back, leaning closer so I can feel his hard cock pressing against my ass cheek. “We’ll eat, play nice for a bit, and then I’m going to take you upstairs and lick you everywhere until you beg me to kiss your bratty little mouth.”

*Fuck.* I push my ass back into him, and he groans softly. “Maybe you’ll be the one begging me to kiss you,” I reply with a smirk.

He snickers and kisses my neck. “Cut the cake, love.”

With everyone else served, I face Carolina. “Kitten, what’s your poison?” I ask her.

She shrugs nonchalantly. “Anything’s fine.”

Xander, who is still standing next to me, chimes in, “She likes chocolate. Give her a piece of that one.”

I raise an eyebrow at him, wondering how he would know that.

“You like chocolate?” Josh asks Carolina, and as I turn my attention back to them, I notice her blush.

“Sure, who doesn’t? Which one do you like?” she asks him.

“Chocolate,” he replies with a smile.

I can't help but let out a huff. "As long as it's sweet and not healthy, he likes it," I say while cutting slices of chocolate cake for Carolina, Josh, and myself before handing them their plate.

"They say you are what you eat, and I'm sugary and delicious," Josh quips, taking a bite of his cake.

I open my mouth to tell him that's bullshit when Carolina chimes in, "If Clay was a spice, he'd be flour."

Josh nearly chokes on his cake before he chuckles, and even Xander coughs behind me.

"I've heard better comebacks from a bowl of Rice Krispies," I retort in a blasé tone.

Carolina lets out the tiniest breath of laughter, quickly biting her lips to conceal it. But I've already caught a glimpse. "Oh, kitten, look at you, laughing at my jokes, just like the best friends we are."

"Your ability to ignore facts is astonishing," she counters, placing her plate on the kitchen counter.

*She took maybe one bite of it.*

"Oh, come on. I know you give a fuck about me, about us. Why else would you be here?" I accuse, my voice filled with a touch of sincerity.

"I'm here because she..." Carolina points her thumb at Sophia, "... blackmailed me. And giving a fuck doesn't go with my outfit."

I roll my eyes so hard it makes Josh let out a laugh. Carolina glares at me.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Did I roll my eyes out loud? Come on, kitten, I know you can do better. That wasn't your usual level of prime sarcasm."

"You think I'm sarcastic? You should hear what I don't say," she says.

"Oh my God, those two are hilarious! I don't think I've ever heard her talk that much before, and I've seen her five

days a week for the past three years. I had no idea she had a sense of humor,” someone whispers loudly, catching my attention.

Carolina’s head jerks to the right, and her eyes flick to Sophia’s friend Susanne. “Professor Summer,” she acknowledges with a brief nod, a hint of discomfort visible in her features.

I study Susanne, who is smiling at Carolina, but as I shift my gaze back to her, I notice that she’s turned bright red, her eyes focused on the floor.

She pulls out her smartphone, breaking the awkward silence. “I’m sorry, I have to go, or I’ll be late,” she says, addressing Sophia. “Thank you again for having me and for the present.”

“I can’t wait for our day,” Sophia says, pulling Carolina into a hug. “Thank you for coming.”

“It’s snowing heavily. How are you getting there?” Josh asks as Sophia releases Carolina.

“It’s okay. The subway station isn’t far. Thank you again. Enjoy the rest of your day,” Carolina says, making her way toward the hallway that leads to the door.

“Wait, I’ll walk you,” Josh says, placing his empty plate on the kitchen island before hurrying after her.

“Your brother has a major crush on that girl,” Susanne chuckles to Sophia, who grins in response.

“I know, and I support it one hundred percent.”

*Why do I feel sick all of a sudden?*

“Come on, love.” Xander’s warm hand rests on my back, gently urging me forward. He grabs one of the champagne bottles from the ice cooler in the kitchen. “I promised to lick you everywhere, and I think I’ll start by licking champagne out of your belly button.”

---

## Josh

Carolina's eyes fix on the pictures adorning the hallway walls as she pulls on her backpack. "You guys have known each other for a long time," she comments.

"We sure have," I say.

She reaches up and lightly touches a picture where Xander, Clay, and I are around five years old. Sophia, who must have been about eight at the time, stands behind us, her arms wrapped tightly around us, almost crushing us in her embrace.

Her gaze then shifts to a graduation picture I took of Clay and Xander, with Clay's mother standing between them, wearing a wide grin and the yellow headscarf she loved so much. It was a difficult day for her, right after one of her chemotherapy treatments.

Carolina continues to scan the other pictures on the wall, her gaze flicking toward the jackets and shoes hanging on the rack near the entryway. "Do you guys live here too?"

*Does she think this is Sophia's place?*

"Too?" I furrow my brows. "This is our side of the house. Sophia's place is next door. We just have a bigger kitchen for gatherings like this. Didn't she tell you?"

She shakes her head. "You don't have to walk me. I'll be fine."

As she opens the door to leave, I quickly grab my jacket and beanie, managing to reach the door before it shuts behind her.

I almost slip and stumble down the porch steps while she's already a few steps down the street, so I hurry to catch up with her. "You're pretty fast for someone with such short legs," I say.

"Or maybe you're just clumsy," she points out, and I chuckle.

*She's not wrong.*

“Do you like snow?” I ask, watching how she holds her bare hands out, trying to catch some snowflakes that instantly melt upon contact.

“I do. I like the cold. It’s calming,” she says.

A thick layer of snow is already on the ground, causing our footsteps to make that familiar crunching sound as we walk along the sidewalk. The falling snowflakes are big, and I stand still, looking up and sticking out my tongue to catch some of them. The cold sensation on my tongue makes me laugh.

When I glance back down at her, I notice her giving me a curious look. “What? Never eaten snowflakes before? You have to try it, it’s awesome!”

She looks down at the ground, fiddling with the straps of her backpack, and my smile falters.

*Please tell me she’s not thinking I’m a complete idiot.*

But then, she smiles to herself, lifts her head, and closes her eyes. She opens her mouth and sticks out her tongue.

I watch, fascinated, as snowflakes land on her face, adorning her nose, eyelashes, and tongue.

*God, she’s beautiful.*

She laughs now too, and my heart skips a beat. It’s the first time I’ve ever heard her laugh out loud. When her golden eyes meet mine again, there’s a mischievous glimmer dancing within them.

*I could get lost in those eyes.*

But before I can say anything, she quickly bends down and scoops up a handful of snow, throwing it at me. It lands right in the middle of my chest.

“Oh, you did not,” I accuse, feigning a glare. Then I lean down to grab some snow myself, but she puts her hands up in a surrendering motion.

“No, I’m sorry! I surrender!” she pleads, her laughter filling the air.

“Pity, I don’t care,” I say, laughing too, as I pull my arm back, ready to retaliate with my own snowball.

She quickly turns, starting to run away from me. But in her haste, she slips on the snow and lands on her ass. I immediately lower my arm, rushing to her side. “Fuck, are you okay?”

“Ouch.” She winces, but then her laughter bubbles up again. “I’m fine, but I hope nobody saw that.”

“Oh, I sure did. I think I’m not the only clumsy one here,” I tease with a grin, tugging at the back of her jacket to discreetly place the snow still in my hand.

She squeals and quickly scrambles back to her feet. “You sneaky bastard.” She laughs, shivering. “It’s running down my back.”

“That was the point,” I shrug.

She turns around, patting her ass to get rid of the snow on her jeans. With each pat, her butt wiggles, and I find it difficult to tear my gaze away. I silently hope that my jacket is long enough to conceal my boner.

*Fuck, how I wish I could be the one patting that fine ass.*

When she’s done, she looks up at me, and I notice an adorable redness on her nose and cheeks. Even the tip of her ear is tinged with red, peeking out from behind her hair that she’s pushed back.

“Wait,” I say, taking off my beanie and placing it on her head. My hands linger there for a moment as I gaze down at her, noticing the snowflakes resting on her lashes and the faint smile on her lips. At this moment, a snowflake lands on her nose, and I instinctively brush away the droplets with my thumb. Her breath catches, and for a brief moment, I contemplate kissing her.

*Is it too soon? I want to kiss her so fucking bad.* Her eyes flicker from my eyes to my lips then back to my eyes again. But just as I’m thinking, *Fuck it*, she takes a step back.

“I need to go so I can make it in time,” she says, breaking the tension.

“Sure, let’s go,” I say, quickly dismissing my disappointment. The walk to the subway station is short, and as we stand there, waiting for the sub, I notice her shivering. “Are you cold?”

“My jacket is crap. I need a new one.” She shrugs, rubbing her hands together.

I step in front of her, placing my hands over hers and rubbing them gently. Then, I bring them to my face and blow warm air onto her hands. She looks up at me with wide eyes.

“Geez, Carolina, your hands are freezing,” I say.

They feel like ice cubes. I take her wrists, one in each of my hands, and tuck her hands into the sleeves of my jacket and sweater. Inside the warmth of the layers, she holds onto my wrists, and a shiver runs down my spine, not just from the coldness of her hands but from her touch.

“Better?” I ask, my thumb gently stroking the inside of her arm.

“Thank you,” she whispers, her voice barely audible.

We stand there in the cold, holding onto each other, looking into each other’s eyes, and I know I will do everything to make this smart, funny, and beautiful girl mine.

*Is it possible to fall this quickly?*

Too soon, the subway arrives, and she slides her arms out of my jacket. She moves to pull the beanie from her head, but I stop her. “Please, keep it.”

“But you’ll be cold,” she protests.

“I’ll manage. It’s more important that you stay warm,” I insist.

I catch a glimmer in her eyes, but she simply nods. “Thank you again,” she says before stepping into the subway.

I watch it depart, and I already miss her.

*I am so fucked.*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

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### **Carolina**

I can't wait to graduate.

Going to college has been stressing me out lately. It was always the way to get my dream job, and now that it seems all set for me, it's hard to stay motivated. Still, I want to graduate with the best possible result, so I continue studying. At least the minimum.

I never had to study much to get good grades before, anyway. I only studied Saturday at the tattoo shop for today's test, and it was still enough to ace it.

I walk into the lab, focused on my phone, when a text from Chiara pops up.

I am going to sleep over at Leo's tonight.

*I love how she just informs me and doesn't ask for permission.*

She's only sixteen, and it's a Monday night. I probably shouldn't let her sleep at her boyfriend's place. My mom would definitely disapprove. However, if I come across as strict now, she might just do it secretly without telling me. It's not as if I am home half the night to see if she stays there.

"*Mi dispiace, Mama,*" <I am sorry, Mom,> I whisper, looking up at the ceiling before sending her a thumbs-up emoji in response.

Sophia looks up from her desk and asks, “Did you say something?”

I quickly put my phone in my back pocket, replying, “Oh, nothing. Hey, how are you?”

I place my backpack behind my desk, but as I look up, I’m surprised to see the bouquet of flowers that Josh got me yesterday on my desk. I can’t help but smile and reach out to touch them.

Sophia notices my reaction and teases, “He made sure I took them with me since you forgot them yesterday.”

“Thank you, they are so beautiful,” I say, admiring the flowers.

“They are. Joshy did an awesome job. He’s considerate and loving, and any girl would be happy to have his attention,” she says.

Taking my seat behind the desk, I say, “I can see that. He’ll make someone happy one day.”

Sophia’s smile widens as she says, “Well, consider yourself happy.”

“Wait, what?” I give her a puzzled look, but she smiles and takes a sip from the mug I made.

“Oh, I got your paycheck from HR. I hope you don’t mind. I had to go up there anyway to sort out your contract for after college.” She nods toward an envelope on my desk.

I take it and open it carefully. When I pull out the check, I freeze. My heart races, and I feel like I might be sick.

“Are you okay? You look a little pale,” she says, a touch of humor in her tone.

This paycheck is three times the amount I earned at the bagel café. Together with what I earn from the bar and maybe a few Saturdays at Xander’s, I can easily cover the rent and all the expenses for the new year and buy Chiara the laptop she needs for Christmas.

Tears well up in my eyes, and I can't hold them back as one rolls down my cheek. Rent was already due last Friday, and I had to ask for an extension and the option to pay in installments. But now, I can pay it in full and even buy some extra groceries beyond just the necessities.

Through my watery laughter, I manage to say, "Fuck."

Sophia looks at me with understanding and a hint of sadness in her eyes, but she also smiles warmly. "You deserve it, Carolina. It's a pleasure to work with you."

---

## Josh

Headquarters is bustling with people, as usual. We just returned from a case where a kid got his arm stuck in a candy machine. Our role was just to stand there and make sure the firefighters could work without being bothered by the curious onlookers who had gathered.

"I thought stuff like that only happens in movies." Clay chuckles.

"Mm-hmm..." I mutter, not fully present at the moment.

My mind is still preoccupied with *her*. Ever since I first saw her, she's captivated me, and the attraction only grew stronger with each witty response and every mesmerizing gaze she directed my way.

But since yesterday...

Since I heard her laugh, saw her playful side, and felt her soft skin against mine... *I'm a goner*.

But is she really okay? I want to ask every time I see her, but it's too soon. We're still getting to know each other.

Clay isn't wrong with his nickname for her. She's like a black cat. You have to earn her trust and affection. And I'm more than ready for that challenge. I just hope she sees it too, and feels the same pull.

I can't help but wonder if she's ever had someone truly care for her, someone who would fight for her, protect her. Maybe, just maybe, she might let me be that person.

We greet some other officers while we make our way down to the lab to get the girls to go eat something with us.

When we walk in, Carolina sits behind her desk with the flowers I gave her right there, which makes me happy. But then, I notice her eyes are all red. My stomach drops, a mix of concern and confusion filling me.

*Has she been crying?*

Something must've happened.

It's killing me that I don't know what is going on with her. Did she get hurt again?

"Ladies, you can call us heroes because we just rescued a little boy," Clay boasts as he heads toward Sophia's desk.

I follow right behind but stop in front of Carolina, trying to figure out what's bothering her.

"What happened?" Sophia asks.

"He got his arm stuck in a candy machine," Clay says.

"Why didn't they call the firefighters then?" Sophia questions.

Clay shrugs. "They did, but—" Carolina interrupts with a huff, and Clay turns to her. "What? I was still an important part of the case."

"I'd agree with you, but then we'd both be wrong," she says, her eyes no longer watery, which eases my worries a bit.

Clay seems annoyed. "Next time, I'll call you for help, and your comments can do the job."

"They would've helped at least as much as you did," she says, not even looking up from her desktop. I have to hold back a chuckle. This girl will be the death of me or Clay, the way his face is getting red.

“Anyway,” he says, shooting her a glare, but then a smirk appears on his lips. “Being a hero does make you hungry. Are you girls ready?”

Sophia stands. “I am, but Carolina has to leave early to cash in her first paycheck,” she announces, looking at her with pride.

Carolina stands, looking back at her with a small smile, and I think I just figured out why she seemed upset. Fuck, I hope it’s enough to balance out what that fine took from her.

“Look at that girl bossing hard over there, kitten,” Clay says, and Carolina just gives him a look.

“Let’s go. Are you coming, Joshy?” Sophia asks as she and Clay are halfway out of the lab.

“In a minute,” I reply, seizing this chance, and she smiles at me before ushering Clay out and closing the door. Carolina is still packing her stuff into her backpack when I walk up to her, and she stops to look up at me. “Hey,” I say, smiling, and my heart feels like it’s about to burst.

She smiles back at me, a small and shy smile. “Hey.”

“Did you get there in time yesterday?” I ask, reaching out to pick a piece of lint off her shoulder. Her gaze follows my hand, and her cheeks are flushed when she looks back up at me.

“I did,” she says, her breath quickening slightly.

“I really enjoyed that short walk alone with you,” I tell her.

“I did too,” she says.

“I would love to spend more time with you, get to know you better,” I say, stepping even closer. “I want to get to know the side of you that you don’t show anyone else.” Her lips part slightly, and her breath hitches. “At the risk of getting brutally shot down...” I smirk, “... would you go out with me?”

“On a real date?” she asks, her eyes wide.

“Are there any ‘not real’ ones? Sorry, it’s been a while since I’ve been in the dating scene, but yes, a real date. Let me

take you to dinner?" I ask, my voice hopeful.

"I'm working every night. I don't have time to go out," she says, looking down at her feet.

"If that's a nice way of saying no, that's okay. But if it is about the time, what would you say if I brought the date to you?"

"What do you mean?" she asks.

"Just tell me, would you like to go on a date with me, Carolina?" I ask, pushing a strand of hair behind her ear.

"Yes," she whispers, making my stomach flutter.

"Then I'm going to make it happen. Wednesday?" I ask.

"Wednesday," she echoes softly.

I lean down and kiss her on the cheek, lingering for a moment before whispering in her ear. "I can't wait."

I straighten and find her surprised golden eyes gazing up at me. I smile once more before walking out of the lab to find Clay and Sophia and trying hard not to skip like a kid.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

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### **Carolina**

Sleep seems impossible.

I've been laying in bed for an hour now, my mind filled with thoughts of Josh and our date.

I can't believe I made it through my bar shift tonight with how all over my emotions are.

*He actually asked me out!*

Normally, I'd doubt it and think he's just making fun of me, but deep down, I feel he's genuine. He's so sweet, kind, and considerate. He makes me believe he's truly interested in me, even if I have no idea why he would be.

I mean, look at him, then look at me.

I never thought a guy like him would give me the time of day, but there he was, smiling down at me with those dimples, making me feel all dizzy. I have no clue how he plans to make this date happen or what he has in mind, but I would've been so disappointed if my schedule had messed it up.

So, I'll just wait and see. But the wait itself feels like torture.

*Dio.*

With Chiara spending the night with Leo, laying alone in bed leads to thoughts about Josh, and they are getting less innocent by the second. I'm a virgin, but not naïve. Taking care of myself is something I do every once in a while when I

have some privacy. I thought I'd be alone forever, so there's nothing wrong with a little self-care.

My hand starts to wander between my thighs, and my other hand slips under my T-shirt, cupping my breast.

In my fantasy, Josh is there, kneeling between my thighs, holding them open while he devours my pussy. I look down at him, and he slowly licks from my entrance to my clit, never breaking eye contact.

"Fuck," I whimper out, my head falling back.

I'm so close to coming, but just as I'm about to reach that point, my fantasy has a mind of its own, and Xander's voice says, "Good girl, come for us." Clay's chuckle follows right after.

I sit up straight, pulling my hands out of my clothes as if they were on fire.

"Get it together," I whisper to myself, quickly standing to go to the kitchen for a cold glass of water.

I switch on the kitchen light and grab a glass from the cupboard, filling it with water from the tap. Leaning against the kitchen counter with my hip, I take small sips, letting the cool liquid lower my body's heat.

My conscience isn't telling me anything new. I know I have a crush on all of them. But with Josh, it's different, like a real possibility, something genuine. I believe he could be the one I've always longed for, the one for me.

Clay and Xander, on the other hand, are just crushes that can't lead anywhere. They are a gay couple, for fuck's sake. Yes, they are kind, funny, and fucking hot. Xander's gentle side makes me weak, and his dominant side makes me wet. Clay makes me want to argue with him half the night just to fuck it out for the rest of it. But it's all just a fantasy. Nothing will come from this inappropriate crush.

So, I suppose it's okay to dream as long as I focus on Josh, the one I should be dreaming about. Which I do.

*Fuck, why do I feel the need to justify my feelings, even to myself?*

The apartment door opens, and I freeze. I assumed Roberto was already in his room asleep. But it seems he's not. I'm torn between staying where I am, hoping he won't notice me, or trying to sneak back into my room.

Just as I'm about to move, he enters the kitchen, his face angry as fuck. This differs from the usual drunk state he's in when upset. He looks more sober than I've seen him in years, and that sends panic coursing through me.

"What are you doing?" he demands as he steps into the kitchen.

"Nothing, I was just going back to my room," I say, trying to walk past him. But he grabs my left wrist tightly.

"What the fuck is this?" he asks, his grip nearly bruising as he turns my wrist to see the tattoo on the inside of my forearm.

"N-nothing," I stammer, trying to pull down the sleeve of my T-shirt in a desperate and mindless move.

"Is that why there was no money? Did you use it to get yourself a silly little animal tattoo?"

"No, that was not—"

"You use my money for shit like this?" He nearly spits.

"No, that's not what happened," I say, tears brimming in my eyes. I'm so fucking scared.

Most of the time, Roberto is so drunk when he hurts me that he can't even focus his eyes on mine. His gaze is piercing right now, and he's out for blood.

"You should've known better, Carolina," he states, almost in a kind voice, but his intentions are clear.

He grabs my other wrist, slamming both of them onto the kitchen counter, causing sharp pain in my knuckles. He holds both my wrists tightly in one hand while taking out a switchblade from his back pocket with the other.

Most of the time, I retreat into the back of my mind, letting him do what he has to, trying to endure it calmly. But I know this will escalate, and I try to pull my arms out of his grasp with all I have, screaming at him to let go of me.

“Roberto, please, no! It wasn’t your money, but I can bring you more money. I can get it for you, please,” I beg, my voice growing more desperate by the second.

But he seems determined to punish me. He opens the blade and coldly says, “You like animals so much you need them on your skin? Let me add another piece, and it’s all for free.”

He leans over my right forearm and starts carving a line into my skin. The pain is unbearable. I plead with him to stop, but he continues without mercy. I kick at him and let myself fall to the floor in the hopes of him loosening his grip on my wrist, but all it does is force him to come with me down onto the floor, leaning over me. He lets go of my wrists, and I want to bolt when he brings the knife to my throat. My eyes go wide, my whole body shaking.

“You choose. Your arm or your throat. What will it be?” he asks, leaning so near his forehead nearly touches mine.

I contemplate for a second. I could just let him. I could just make it all end. It would be a relief. But then I think about Chiara and what my parents would think of me if they knew I was thinking about leaving her alone with this monster.

So, I hold out my arm to him.

He narrows his gaze at me but then moves the blade away from my throat, and I can breathe again. He kneels beside me and starts carving again.

I just lay on the floor, tears streaming down my face silently, clenching my teeth so hard I wouldn’t be surprised if one of them cracked. The pain is nearly unbearable, but I am not going to give in.

*I made a decision.*

While he is working, I imagine all the ways I would like to kill this man. I don’t give a fuck anymore how it happens. I just want it to be bloody.

When he is done, he wipes off his knife on my T-shirt and returns to his feet. I just look up at the ceiling, lying there.

“You are never going to steal my money again, or next time, I will not give you the option to choose,” he warns, walking out of the kitchen and into his room.

I lay there for a while, feeling the warm, sticky blood slowly running down my forearm and pooling on the ground. I can't muster the strength to look at my arm.

Out of nowhere, I feel sick and rush to the bathroom just in time to throw up into the toilet. After I flush, I sink to the floor.

Gathering the courage, I finally glance at my arm. It's covered in blood, and I use my ruined T-shirt to wipe it clean. Some of it has dried, making it difficult to see, but eventually, the carving becomes visible. As I read the word *PIG* brutally etched onto my forearm, my heart sinks.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

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### **Carolina**

I can't bear it a second longer.

If I have to stay a moment more alone in my room. I don't know what I will do to myself, to him. I just can't. And going to college this early is out of the question.

I'm having a panic attack.

*I can barely breathe.*

So, I go to the only place I know I will be welcomed with open arms.

---

As I walk in, I keep my head down, avoiding eye contact with anyone I might know. It's only seven, so it's relatively quiet.

When I approach Howie, he's sitting on his bed with his head hanging.

"About time you came..." He starts, but when he sees my face, he sucks in a breath, "Lina, what—"

I start to sob, not giving a fuck about the people around us, still asleep when I sit next to him on the bed and wrap my arms around his waist. Howie pulls me close, one hand on my back and the other cupping the back of my head.

He pulls away, concern and worry written all over his face as he asks, "What happened? What did he do? Are you okay?"

Howie is the only one besides Chiara who knows about Roberto's abuse. I never explicitly told him, but he has seen the evidence more than enough.

It's no secret in the neighborhood that Roberto is a piece of shit.

"No," I whisper, clutching his shirt tightly in my fist behind his back, going back to sobbing into his shoulder uncontrollably. He tries to comfort me, rubbing my back, but my emotions are overwhelming. "I can't do this anymore. I'm tired. My soul is tired. I wake up every fucking day to fight the same fucking battle, and it only leads to more pain."

"Shh..." he coos, stroking my hair.

"They can't expect that from me. It's too much. I tried, I did, but I can't keep doing this for two more years, Howie. I'm not strong enough."

"Who expects that?" he asks.

"My parents," I whisper. "They're gone, so I have to take care of her because I'm the big sister. Keep her safe. Not let him hurt her." I sob again. "And who keeps me safe? Who cares for me?" I struggle to breathe. "Who stops him from hurting me?"

"What did he do, Carolina," Howie asks again, leaning back to look at me. There is a sheen of tears in his own eyes.

I pull back the sleeve of my hoodie, hissing when it presses on the wound. I put some bandages to cover it, so I open them, pulling them off. Howie sucks in a breath when my arm is completely revealed. The cuts are angry and red, and his eyes bolt up to find mine. Tears still flowing, I bite down on my lips, but my breathing is not as panicked as before.

He takes the bandage, wraps my arm up again, and pulls the sleeve of my hoodie down, careful not to hurt me with it. "Did you sleep, kid?" he asks gently. I shake my head in response. "Let's take care of the basics first before we tackle the big problems," he suggests.

He sits on the bed and scoots over, his back against the headboard. He sits on the covers but opens them beside him,

inviting me to lie down. With my back to him, I curl up on my side, and he arranges the covers over me.

He starts humming “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” while petting my head. As my tears continue to flow, my breathing evens out, and eventually, I cry myself to sleep next to him, finding a brief moment of comfort.

---

When I wake, Howie is still there, sitting next to me, lost in thought, until he notices I’m awake and turns his head toward me.

“Feeling better?” he asks.

Surprisingly, I do feel a bit better. The pain in my arm still lingers as does the weight on my chest, but the overwhelming despair has subsided.

“Seems like it,” I say, sitting up. “I’m sorry, I panicked. I wasn’t thinking straight. I just...”

“Shh...” Howie soothes. “You had every right to be afraid. We won’t dismiss what he did to you.”

“You’re right. I needed a break and some sleep. I’ve been going on just a few hours every night for too long.” I nod.

“Lina, that’s not...” Howie starts.

“No, it’s okay,” I insist, not wanting to burden him further. “I can handle it. It’s nothing new. It’s my fault for not being more careful, for not wearing more clothes, for not avoiding him.”

“It’s not your fucking fault!” Howie’s voice rises, his gaze intense.

“I know,” I whisper, tears welling up again. “But what else can I do? There’s no other way but to endure it.”

He looks at me, frustrated. “Lina, you don’t have to go through this alone. We can figure something out, find a way to

protect you. You could tell those asshats you're working with, for starters. Aren't they there to handle shit like this?"

"You know why I can't do that," I reply softly.

"Chiara," he says, letting his head fall back to the headboard.

"Chiara." I nod.

"You said some of them were okay. Can't you ask them for advice? Maybe there's a way out, and we just don't know it?" he asks.

"No, the risk is too high that they might take matters into their own hands and do something stupid," I say, thinking about how Josh would likely react if he knew about Roberto's abuse and how he might try to do something to protect me without thinking about Chiara.

"Why did you get all blushy?" Howie asks, studying my face. "Don't tell me you have a thing for a cop?" I bite my lip. Howie looks at me for a moment before laughing softly. "Stupid, stupid kid."

"I know, but he's just... I don't know. He sees me, Howie. It's the first time someone has seen me behind all the walls I put up. The first time someone has bothered to look closer," I say.

"That's not true. A lot of people see how special you are. You're the one not looking closely enough to see how many people you touch with your kindness," Howie states.

"I'm a bitch to people most of the time." I huff.

"Not when it counts," he insists.

I hesitate before telling him, "He asked me on a date, and I said yes. It's tomorrow. I'm just so afraid of fucking this up with him."

Howie smiles at me reassuringly. "Do you want to know what I learned with my Mary?" I nod. "If it's meant to be, you can't mess it up. And if it's not meant to be, you can't fix it." I furrow my brows, pondering his words. "Just be yourself, let that boy in, and show him the real you. Give it a chance. Don't

sabotage yourself. If it doesn't work out, it just wasn't meant to be. You've endured much worse. But if it is..." he smiles up at the ceiling, "... if it is meant to be, it's worth every try and every leap you have to take."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

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### **Josh**

“That looks so cute, Joshy.” Sophia beams at me. “There’s no way for her not to be in love with you after that.”

I rub the back of my neck. “You think she’ll like it?”

“It’s still kitten we’re talking about. Does she even like stuff?” Clay teases, and I elbow him in the ribs.

“Ouch. Okay, okay, she’ll definitely not hate it, and that must be good enough,” he laughs, rubbing his side.

Sophia has sent Carolina on a little scavenger hunt to gather some things they don’t need so we can set up everything in the office area of the lab. We pushed the desks to the back of the room and arranged a small folding table with two chairs. Then, I added a tablecloth to make it look nicer.

I placed a bowl of chocolate fondue in the middle of the table, the chocolate kept warm and fluid by a candle beneath it. Around the bowl are strawberries, bananas, and marshmallows to dip into the chocolate. On another corner of the table, I placed a cooler with ice cubes to keep the alcohol-free sweet sparkling wine I bought nice and cold.

As soft music plays in the background, I know I did the best I could with the circumstances. We only have the time we usually have to eat something in the cafeteria before we both have to work again. But I’m determined to make the most of it.

“Let’s go, she’s going to come back any minute now,” Sophia tells Clay, ushering him out of the lab.

“Don’t do anything I wouldn’t.” Clay winks at me.

I stand there, my nerves getting the best of me as I wait for her. My pulse is racing. I want this to work out so badly. No, I *need* it to work out. I can’t stop thinking about her. The last time I felt so infatuated was back in high school, but that was just a silly crush. This time, with her, there’s something more.

*She has the potential to be my everything.*

The door opens, and in walks Carolina, looking absolutely stunning. She’s focused on the stuff she’s carrying, but her hair is styled in soft waves, and she’s wearing a bit more makeup than usual. Her lips are a pretty dark red shade that I’d love to kiss. She’s wearing her usual black clothes, but the buttons on her shirt are open just enough to show a bit of cleavage.

“You were right, Mr. Donovan is a total jerk,” she comments, only looking up when I laugh. She seems to be searching for Sophia, but then her eyes land on the table I set up.

“Wow,” she says as she puts everything on the lab bench and walks over to me.

“Hey,” I smile at her, and when she’s close enough, I take her hand and pull her in to give her a hug. She twitches lightly. “I’m so happy you could make it to our first date,” I say into her hair, which smells like apples.

“Of course, I made sure I was on time. I wasn’t just stumbling into it,” she jokes.

I kiss her head and let go, walking over to the table and pulling out a chair for her. “Please, have a seat.”

She sits, looking over everything with a smile. I’m still not used to seeing anything other than her blasé expression. “This looks so beautiful,” she says.

“No, you’re the one looking beautiful,” I say, inwardly cringing at that lame line.

Walking over to my chair, I trip over the cloth and end up on my knees.

“Fuck, are you okay?” she asks, ready to get up.

But I just laugh it off and turn myself to kneel in front of her. “I told you I don’t mind kneeling in front of you.” I grin before I get up, quickly sitting in my chair, my cheeks heating with a blush.

*Why am I so unsmooth?*

My nerves are getting to me like never before.

“How are you? How was your day?” I ask, hoping she’ll fill the silence for a moment so I can calm my racing heartbeat.

“I’m okay, thanks,” she says, smiling and fidgeting with her hands, pulling down the sleeve of her Henley. “H-How are you?”

“I’m good, thank you. Really happy you could make it,” I say, realizing I’ve already said that.

I curse myself internally. *What is wrong with me?*

She chuckles a little at my repetition.

“You mentioned you like chocolate, so I figured chocolate fondue couldn’t go wrong. Have you ever tried it?” I ask as I take out the sparkling wine from the ice, filling both our glasses before handing one to her.

“No, but I’m excited to,” she says, clinking her glass with mine. She takes a sip but then sets her glass down again.

The silence at the table is loud, and the tension builds, becoming uneasy.

*Come on, do something, you idiot. She’s not going to go out with you again if this date is going to be nothing but uncomfortable.*

“Why does this feel so awkward?” I ask with a smile, hoping to break the ice.

“I don’t know, maybe because I’m trying too hard to be nice and behave nicely so you’ll like me.” She shrugs, avoiding eye contact.

“Fuck that,” I say, reaching over to grab the side of her chair and pulling it close to my side. At first, her eyes widen in surprise, but then she smiles, looking up at me with her golden eyes. I can even see dark brown speckles in them. “I don’t want nice. I want you,” I state.

Her laughter fills the air, and my stomach flutters with delight at the sound. “Gee, thanks,” she replies with a playful tone.

“You’re welcome,” I say, grinning back.

“So, how does this fondue thing work?” she asks, pointing at the chocolate pot.

“You skewer a piece of fruit or whatever you want on this little fork and then just dip it into the chocolate,” I explain while showing her.

She picks up a strawberry, mimicking my actions. But instead of putting it in her mouth with the fork, she takes the strawberry with her fingers before she slides it between her full lips, letting out a soft moan of delight. I have to move my hips to rearrange my instant hard-on.

“Delicious,” she says, opening her eyes and catching me staring at her.

“I bet you are,” I murmur.

“So, you said you wanted to get to know each other better. Tell me about yourself,” she says while dunking a marshmallow, apparently missing my comment.

“Well, uhhh...” I stammer, trying to think of something interesting to say.

“Here,” she says, holding a half-covered marshmallow between her fingers and bringing it to my lips.

I open my mouth, taking the whole marshmallow and her fingers in. She freezes, looking at my mouth still around her

fingers, and her gaze shoots up to meet my eyes. A blush creeps up her cheeks as she pulls her hand away.

“Thank you,” I say, preparing a marshmallow to dunk myself. “Well, there’s not much to say. I have a sister, as you know.” I grin at her, and she rolls her eyes. “We grew up in the Bronx. Our parents came to America when Sophia was a baby, and I wasn’t even a dirty thought yet.” She chokes on air for a moment before huffing a laugh. “We lived in a neighborhood with Clay and Xander, and we became best friends pretty quickly.”

I take the marshmallow I just dipped between my fingers, just as she did, and hold it to her lips. “Open,” I say softly, and she does.

I feed her the marshmallow, but some chocolate sticks to her lip, so I gently swipe it away with my thumb before bringing it to my mouth to lick it off. I notice Carolina’s eyes follow the movement, and they become hooded.

She clears her throat before asking, “I didn’t see your parents on Sunday. Did I miss them?”

“No, they went back to Korea when I turned eighteen,” I share. “They worked hard to come to America, but my mother missed her home and culture too much. Sophia and I have only known this place as our home, so we decided to stay. They bought us the house and returned to Korea.” She scrunches up her face. “What?” I ask, reaching for her hand and placing it on my knee.

“I don’t want to overstep,” she says.

I chuckle. “You love to overstep.”

“Not when I could hurt your feelings,” she admits.

“Tell me,” I encourage, gently stroking the back of her hand.

“You were eighteen, and Sophia was what? Twenty-one? Leaving you here was pretty selfish, even if they bought you that house,” she says.

I smile. “You’re the first one to see it that way. Everyone else always told me how lucky we were to have that house and no one to complain about house parties and stuff,” I reply. She huffs in response. “It did hurt my feelings a lot when they just up and left. It felt like their culture was more important to them than their kids.” I bring the back of her hand to my lips and kiss it. “I didn’t visit them for a few years because of that. But I’m over it now. We fly over to see them once a year. The beginning was tough, but now I’m glad they live over there. They used to be very strict, and I mean *very*. They controlled nearly everything, from our clothes to what we ate. In Korea, parents have a lot of say. I think I’d still be a virgin if they hadn’t left,” I joke, trying to lighten the mood.

She freezes for a second, but then she takes another marshmallow with her free hand and brings it to my lips. This time, I bite half of it. “Is that why you’re so into sweets?” She grins at me.

“Huh...” I furrow my brows. “I never thought about it like that, but it’s possible.”

She finishes the marshmallow and teases, “You mean probable.”

Lifting her chin with my finger, I make her look up at me, moving closer and into her personal space. “Smart-ass,” I accuse, locking eyes with her. Her breath hitches, and she licks her lips. I’m tempted to kiss her right here and now, to feel those soft lips, but I chicken out and settle for a kiss on the tip of her nose. Then I lean back, letting go of her.

“Tell me something about you?” I direct, changing the direction of the conversation.

“You already know more than is good for me,” she says, avoiding my gaze.

“Then tell me something I don’t know. Tell me something no one else knows,” I say.

Her eyes fall to the cooler with the ice cubes, and she reaches over to take a small one out. “I love to suck on ice cubes,” she says before popping it into her mouth.

I smirk at her. “Suck on ice cubes?”

She nods. “You know that feeling when you’re exhausted and hot, or your head won’t stop racing with thoughts, or even when you’re just overwhelmed? Sucking on ice cubes makes everything better. It calms everything down. It’s like time freezes for a moment, giving you a little break.”

“I’ll have to try it sometime,” I say, gently placing a strand of her hair behind her ear. “Do you only like to suck on ice, or do you skate on it too?”

“What do you mean?” she asks, furrowing her brows.

“The guys, Sophia, and I have planned to go ice-skating this Sunday in Central Park. We do it every year at the beginning of December to ring in Christmas time,” I say.

“I don’t know how to skate. I’ve never done it before,” she shares.

“I’d love to show you. I promise I won’t let you fall,” I say with a smile.

“I’d love to come, but I heard it’s expensive and—”

“Did you enjoy our date today, Carolina?” I ask, cupping her cheek.

“Very much,” she whispers.

“Would you go on another one with me?” I ask, and she nods. “Then let me take you out for ice-skating this Sunday. For our third date, you can decide what we do, and I’ll let you pay if you want to.” I smile smugly.

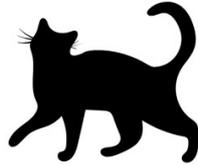
“Who’s the smart-ass now?” she jests, giving me a playful glare.

“So, is that a yes?” I ask.

“Yes, I would love to go ice-skating with you, Josh,” she answers, a smile spreading across her face.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

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### **Carolina**

My head is in the clouds. Cloud nine, to be precise.

I almost burn the eggs as I prepare breakfast for Chiara and me. I am in a constant state of squealing internally while I repeat our date over and over again in my head.

He brought chocolate fondue to work for me. He was so sweet, considerate, and even flirty. And I was just myself, like Howie told me to be—no mask, no need to hide.

As soon as he told me he wanted me, and not a nice version of me, I was a goner. I think I might be in love. I don't know what that feels like, but if it's not like this, what could top that?

Chiara comes into the kitchen and sits in her usual place. "Morning." She yawns.

"*Buongiorno, piccola,*" I greet, placing a plate in front of her. "How are you?"

"Good." She shrugs, starting to eat her eggs.

"Do you already have plans for this Sunday?" I inquire.

She looks up from her plate, curious. "Why?"

"Well, some friends from work and I are going ice-skating in Central Park, and I remember you always wanted to do that. So, I thought I'd ask if you wanted to come along?"

"You have friends?" she asks, sounding surprised.

*Ouch.*

“Yeah, it’s kinda new, but they’re my friends, I guess,” I say, trying not to feel hurt.

“And is one of those ‘friends’ going to be your date?” She grins, and my cheeks heat up. “Wait, really? Oh my God, I need to see that.”

“Chiara,” I warn.

“I’ll bring Leo, and it’ll be like a double date,” she says excitedly.

“Okay, sure, but can you tell him that he’ll need to pay for himself? I’m sorry, but—” I start.

“He’s going to pay for both of us, dummy. He’s my boyfriend, and that’s what they do.” She shrugs nonchalantly.

“Well, that’s not—” I want to lecture her, but then I think I’ll save that for another time. I can be a bit selfish too.

Chiara takes out her phone to text Leo about the new plans. “I’m so excited! This is going to be so much fun.”



Even now, as I’m walking into the lab, I still have no idea what my classes were about because I’m still not totally back to Earth. I smile to myself, and when I look up to say hello, Sophia smiles at me.

“And?” she asks eagerly.

“And what?” I counter, putting my backpack behind my desk and taking a seat.

She takes a sip from her mug, which reads *Mo-tea-vation*. “How was it? I think he outdid himself. That was so fucking cute.”

I cringe a little. “Should I really talk to you about a date with your brother?”

She sits up straight, looking a bit surprised. “Of course, you should! I thought I was your friend, not just your boss?”

“You are?” I ask.

“Yes, I am! Now spill,” she demands.

“It was... nice,” I admit, smiling down at my lap.

“Just nice?” Sophia asks, a little unease in her tone.

“It was so nice, I can’t stop thinking about it,” I whisper, and Sophia jumps up from her chair, pumping her fist into the air, nearly spilling her tea.

“Fuck yes!” she shouts.

“Use your inside voice, woman,” I say, lifting my shoulders to my ears.

She chuckles and settles back in her seat. “Sorry, but this is so freaking cute. He told me he’s going to bring you to our ice-skating thing on Sunday?”

“If it’s okay? And I would bring my little sister and her boyfriend too, since she always wanted to do that, and I just couldn’t go without her,” I say.

“Of course! The more, the merrier.” She smiles, her face glowing with excitement. “Oh, and we got the okay for your parents’ case.”

I sit up straight, my heart pounding. “Really?”

“Really.” Her tone turns serious. “We can start working on it on Monday. But today and tomorrow, we have some urgent cases to handle ”

“Sure,” I say, but deep down, my anxiety rises.

I hope this feeling won’t ruin the weekend.

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Arms wrap around my waist, pulling me into a firm chest as I sort stuff into our lab storeroom. “Hey, you,” Josh whispers into my ear, and I lean back slightly.

“Hey,” I whisper back.

He kisses my temple and murmurs softly, “I missed you. I need your phone number.”

I turn my head to look up at him, teasingly saying, “You could have asked Clay or Sophia.”

“No, I wanted to get it from you,” he clarifies, releasing me and taking out his phone. He unlocks it and opens his contacts before handing it to me, flashing me a cheeky grin. “Can I get your number, please?”

I blush a little but take his phone, seeing that he has already created a new contact named ‘My Carolina.’ The butterflies in my stomach flutter as I enter my number and hand the phone back to him.

He taps at his screen, and a red heart emoji pops up when I check my phone.

Josh takes my hand, leading me to the door. “Let’s go eat. Clay and Sophia are already waiting for us.”

We head to the cafeteria, and Josh holds my hand the entire time. It might seem silly, but it means a lot to me. He doesn’t let go even as we walk in, not seeming embarrassed to be with me.

“Hey, lovebirds.” Sophia smiles as we sit down on the other side of the table. I glance over at Clay, but he’s focused on his plate, paying no attention to us.

“What do you want? I’ll go get us something,” Josh offers, squeezing my forearm, and I have to suppress a hiss when pain shoots toward my shoulder.

I start to say it’s fine, but then Del Moro and his partner show up, standing behind Sophia and Clay with a smug expression.

“Why bother looking at the food when you know you’ll never have enough money to get some, Costa?” Del Moro taunts.

“The same reason you watch porn,” I say in a monotone.

Clay almost chokes on his food, bursting into laughter.

“Shut up, Cooper! I’ll bet you’ve never even seen a pussy,” Del Moro snaps angrily.

Clay glares back at him.

“He’s staring at one right now,” I note.

“You fucking bitch,” Del Moro snaps, leaning over to reach for me, but Josh and Clay stand.

Josh pushes Del Moro away to create some more distance between us. “Don’t you dare touch her,” he warns in a tone I’ve never heard from him before.

“Yeah, rookie, fuck off. Or do we need to file a complaint with HR and make your cop career a very short one? I bet they always need security guards at supermarkets. What do you think, Josh?” Clay adds.

“I think he would make an awesome security guard.” Josh grins back.

“Oh look, Lee is into fat, poor, emo girls. Did you know that, Taylor?” Del Moro mocks. Then he leans down to me, telling me in a softer tone, “They are not going to be there all the time, Costa. I can’t wait for the next time your uncle is letting a bit loose.” He winks at me before storming off.

“The same reason you watch porn.” Clay snickers, sitting back down.

“You okay?” Josh asks, cupping my face with concern in his eyes.

“Sure,” I say, but there’s an uneasy feeling in my stomach.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

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### **Xander**

“Hey, my love,” I whisper, still half-asleep.

Clay’s arm wraps around my waist, pulling me close to a comforting, warm chest.

“Hey, babe, I’m sorry I woke you,” Clay apologizes, planting a gentle kiss on the back of my neck.

“No, please wake me up. I always sleep better when I know you’re right beside me,” I say, turning to hug him tightly.

I press my lips to his forehead and take in a deep breath, savoring the scent of his ginger-eucalyptus shampoo. His hair is still slightly damp from the shower. “I miss you, love. Late shifts are tough.”

He holds me tighter. “I know, I’m sorry. Just a few more weeks,” he reassures me.

The room is enveloped in darkness, but the soft glow of the streetlamps outside casts a gentle light through the windows, just enough so I can see his eyes.

I gently cup his cheek and stroke it with my thumb. “How was your day?”

“Nothing that I haven’t already texted you, but Carolina was absolutely hilarious today. She...” Clay starts, a hint of amusement in his voice.

I smirk knowingly. “You like her, don’t you?”

He looks at me with wide eyes, slightly caught off guard. “No, I mean, yes, but not like that. She’s just fun to be around,” he clarifies, defending himself.

I let my thumb trace over his bottom lip gently. “You can tell me, you know that. Is she someone you’d like to invite?”

Clay lowers his gaze. “I don’t know. Josh would probably kill us.”

I nod. “It’s possible he would have a problem with that.” I smirk. “She’s not your usual type.”

Clay tends to be attracted to tall, blonde, model-like girls, while I lean more toward the cute and curvy type. But since that is mostly not the type of girl who is into an arrangement like ours, we stick to Clay’s preferences. Not that I am complaining.

“I know. She’s not what I’d typically go for. She is fucking cute, though, and she has that radiance. I don’t know, it’s just... there’s something about her, you know? Maybe it’s her sassy mouth.” Then he admits, “I want to spank her ’til she is a good girl for me so badly.”

I think about Carolina’s fine-as-fuck dump truck and agree wholeheartedly with the spanking.

I let my hand wander to his throat, gently squeezing it. “Oh, so my boy wants a good girl?” I ask, my gaze fixed on his lips.

“Yes,” he breathes out, and I get on top of him, my knee between his legs, before I kiss him deeply.

“But only good boys get good girls,” I say against his lips. “Are you a good boy for me?”

“Yes,” he says again, moaning when I press my knee against his crotch.

“I think you’ll have to prove that,” I tease, my hand wandering down to his boxers.

Since we both sleep in just our underwear, it’s easy for me to slip my hand inside his and grasp his already hard cock. He

hisses at the sensation as I stroke him a few times, enjoying the familiar power I still have over him after all these years.

“Please,” he whimpers out, and I use my other hand to pull down his boxers, freeing him of them.

“Please, what?” I ask, positioning myself between his legs and leaning over his beautiful, thick cock, already dripping with pre-cum.

“Please, fuck me.” He moans, and in response, I lick a slow, deliberate path from the base of his cock to the tip, taking him into my mouth. “Fuck.” He groans.

I release him from my mouth with a pop. “Oh, I’m definitely going to fuck you, but only if you’re a good boy and let me suck this beautiful cock first.”

I slide my lips back around him, sucking and relishing the way he squirms beneath me, his grip on the covers tightening.

“Xander,” he moans out, the pleasure evident in his voice.

“You know I have to prepare you for me first, love,” I remind him, kissing the tip of his cock before standing.

I pull down my boxers and reach for the bottle of lube from our nightstand. Returning between Clay’s spread thighs, I squeeze a generous amount of lube onto him, his legs instinctively rising to his chest to give me easier access.

“Look at you, being such a good boy for me tonight,” I praise, my voice filled with adoration as I start to circle his puckered hole with my thumb. “God, I’ve missed your tight little ass too. I’ve been thinking about it all day.”

“After ten years of taking your massive cock, I don’t think it’s quite as tight anymore,” he breathes out.

I slap him on the thigh before leaning in to grab his throat again. “You little brat,” I scold. “I’m not going to fuck you when you talk about yourself like that.”

Squeezing his throat, I slide my finger inside him, making him moan. “See?” I whisper, my voice laced with desire. “Tight and perfect as fuck.” I peck his lips before releasing

him, focusing on stretching him out further by sliding another finger inside.

“Oh my God.” Clay groans, his eyes shut and his head falling back on the pillow.

I withdraw my fingers and apply more lube, making sure we’re both covered. Then leaning over him, I kiss him passionately as I guide the head of my cock into his entrance. He gasps for air, breaking the kiss, and I rest my forehead against his, my voice filled with love and tenderness. “I love you so damn much,” I whisper, trying to be gentle as I press further inside.

He pushes his ass back against me, gripping the back of my head, and hisses out, “Shut up and fuck me already.”

I chuckle, biting his lip, before sitting up straight again. “Then be a good boy and take all of it.”

I push his thighs further toward his chest, sinking my cock deep inside him, relishing in the sweet sound of his moans with every thrust. Once fully seated inside, I look at him. “You good, love?”

Topping him always comes with a mix of pain and pleasure, and I never want to hurt him.

“Yes, babe. Don’t make me beg again,” he pleads, his eyes flying open as I begin to move.

“Holy shit, you feel so fucking good,” I say, closing my eyes and picking up the pace of my thrusts.

“Yes, oh my God.” Clay moans, his hands gripping my shoulders for support.

“Look at my boy, taking my cock so damn well,” I praise, my voice laced with pleasure as I feel his tight ass clench around my shaft. “Fuck, love.”

With one hand, I take hold of his cock, stroking him in time with my thrusts. “Xander,” he moans out.

“Imagine Carolina riding this cock while I fuck your ass,” I say, gripping him hard.

“Fuck!” He nearly whimpers, his grip on the sheets tightening as he presses his eyes shut.

“Imagine how her tight, wet pussy squeezes your cock while I fill your ass,” I continue, my voice raspy. “Imagine her moaning our names, being a good girl for us.” His cock twitches in my hand.

And I know he is close.

“Babe, fuck, I—” he starts, but he’s cut off as he comes, releasing his load all over my hand and his stomach. The intense sensation of his ass squeezing my cock triggers my own orgasm.

“Holy...” I grunt, finishing inside him.

“Shit, that was...” Clay says, looking up at me with awe in his eyes. I slowly pull out of him, bringing my hand, coated with his cum, to my mouth to lick it clean.

“You’re so fucking dirty. I love it. I love you,” he says, pulling me down for a deep kiss.

I pull back, pecking his forehead before making my way to our en suite bathroom, grabbing a warm, wet washcloth to gently clean Clay’s stomach and ass. Then, I clean myself at the bathroom sink before returning to bed and lying beside him.

I pull him close, his head resting on my chest.

“We need to find a way to make that fantasy reality, babe, because fuck, I don’t think I ever came so hard in my life,” Clay mumbles.

I chuckle. *I wouldn’t mind that, either.*

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

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### **Carolina**

The only thing I had to look forward to for most of the day was when Josh would text me from time to time. But my phone is still trash, so I could only send back an emoji in response.

Work in the lab is interesting, which makes the time go by faster, and soon, Clay and Josh come in to get us to go eat.

When Josh's gaze finds mine, my heart skips a beat. He comes over and pulls me into a hug, sniffing my hair.

"You're not big on texting, it seems," he comments, his face still buried in my hair.

"I—" I start, but Clay interrupts with an annoyed huff.

"I'm starving, guys. Can we schedule the smooching for later?"

Josh rolls his eyes at me, and I can't help but smirk as he gives me a quick kiss on the nose before taking my hand and leading me out to where the others are waiting.

"Today is Pizza Friday." Josh wiggles his eyebrows at me as we enter the cafeteria.

I laugh. "Of course, that is something you like."

"You will see why. Can I grab a slice for you too?" he asks. "Even Clay gets one from time to time since it's so good."

We walk up to the counter, and Clay and Sophia are already getting their pizzas. “We’ll meet you at the table,” Sophia tells us.

I note the price on the display, and it’s only five dollars. *Fuck it.* I made good tips yesterday, and they all got one, so why not.

I grab a slice of Margherita and join Josh at the cashier to pay, then we head over to our usual table.

“... no, I will not make that mistake again. He kissed like a dead fish,” Sophia complains.

“Who are we talking about,” I ask.

“There is a cop who is into Sophia, but she went out with him once and never gave that poor man a chance again. He looks at her like a lost puppy.” Clay snickers.

“It was just awful. He is nice and all, but the kiss he gave me...” she makes a sour face, and her body shakes, “... not a fucking chance. Agree with me, Carolina. Guys who can’t kiss are not dateable. Kissing is important.”

“I wouldn’t know,” I reply quietly, shrugging.

“What?” Sophia asks.

“I’ve never kissed someone before,” I say, focusing on my pizza.

“Wait, you’ve never been kissed?” Clay asks, his eyes widening in surprise.

Sophia chimes in, “Don’t be mean, Cooper!”

“I’m not being mean. I just can’t believe it. How come you haven’t kissed anyone? You’re twenty-two!” Clay says in shock.

*Dammit! Why did I have to open my mouth?*

Trying to appear unaffected, I casually reply, “It just hasn’t happened.” The entire conversation bothers me, so I try to change the topic, asking, “Are you guys looking forward to Sunday?”

Clay refuses to let it go, probing further, “Are you one of those girls who is waiting until marriage?”

Caught off guard while taking a sip of water, I almost spit it out. Chuckling, I say, “Nope, not planning on getting married.”

He furrows his brow. “We’ll come back to that, but what is it then, kitten?”

Sophia jumps in to defend me, saying, “Maybe she simply wants it to be with the right person, in the perfect moment. Maybe she’s a romantic. Stop bothering her!”

I smile at her, thankful for her attempt at defending me. “That’s a sweet thought, but honestly, I’ve reached a point where I don’t care about the circumstances. I just want it to be someone who genuinely *wants* to kiss me,” I admit, looking at Josh before quickly looking back down at my hands in my lap.

I’m surprised at myself for opening up like this. It’s not like me, but they already feel like friends. It’s as if I finally understand what friendship is supposed to feel like, even though I’ve never experienced it before.

Josh gently tucks a strand of my hair behind my ear, causing me to turn and meet his gaze. Sitting next to me, he looks at me with such tenderness and warmth as he cups my cheek. My heart races in response.

Then, he softly says, “I would love to kiss you. May I?”

His eyes shift from my eyes to my lips, and in a whisper, I surprise myself by saying, “Yes.”

At that moment, time seems to stand still as Josh leans closer. With a gentle touch, his lips meet mine. The kiss is soft, sending a rush of emotions through my entire being. The world outside melts away, leaving only the warmth of his touch and the sweet taste of his kiss. My heart pounds in my chest.

Eventually, he pulls away, resting his forehead against mine, smiling.

The world comes rushing back as Del Moro shouts from behind us, “See? I told you guys, Lee likes fat, poor, emo girls.”

I quickly pull away from Josh and put on my indifferent mask, although it’s harder with my heart in chaos from that first kiss. Josh is fuming, and it’s obvious he’s about to stand and defend me, but I tug at his sleeve, signaling him to stay seated. He looks at me, searching my face for guidance.

I mouth, *Don’t*.

I gather my courage and rise to my feet, crossing my arms over my chest, my face void of emotion.

Facing Del Moro, I say, “Careful, your constant fixation with my body could lead others to think you want the fat, poor, emo girl yourself, and we can’t have that now, can we?”

“Go back to the ghetto you crawled out of, Costa.” He sneers at me.

Unfazed, I retort, “Oh, don’t worry, I will. And I’ll make sure to say hi to your mom when I get there.”

I know ‘your mom’ jokes are cheap, but it’s funny because his mother lives in the same building as me, and I often see her. It hits a nerve for him because he despises the idea that his own mother is no better off than he thinks I am.

“Fuck off,” he spits out before storming off with his partner.

Clay begins to slow-clap from the table, saying, “Iconic, kitten... as always.”

I glance over at Josh, and his expression is filled with unease. My heart sinks. He must regret kissing me and the attention it has brought upon him. He’s such a sweet and shy person, and I’ve inadvertently made him a target.

I bite my lip.

“Carolina...” He starts, getting to his feet.

I quickly check my phone and say, “Sorry. I have to go. See you Sunday.”

I grab my backpack from the floor, trying my best to hide the rush of emotions, and make my way out of the building, fighting the urge to run.

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## **Josh**

In a state of shock, I watch her fine ass walk away, feeling a mixture of regret and disappointment.

Suddenly, a sharp slap connects with the back of my head when I sit back down.

“You’re such a stupid fucking idiot, you know that?” Sophia hisses at me.

“I thought it was the perfect opportunity to make a move, and honestly, if he hadn’t done it, I would have,” Clay says, and I furrow my brow at him. “Xander would have understood.” He shrugs. “Being someone’s first kiss is special.”

Sophia raises her voice and shouts at us, “It *is* fucking special! She waited twenty-two years for her first kiss, and you, you idiot, did it in the cafeteria, in front of everyone, and now this kiss will forever be tainted by *that* asshole.”

I wince. I had thought it was a spontaneous and romantic moment, but she’s right. I acted like a complete fool.

“Don’t be so harsh. It looked like she enjoyed it,” Clay notes, trying to defend me.

Sophia lets out a frustrated sigh. “Sure, she seemed to enjoy it. But afterward, she practically ran out of here because you looked at her as if you already regretted it,” she accuses.

My head spins to look at her. “I don’t regret it,” I almost shout. “It was the best damn kiss I’ve ever had.”

She shakes her head disapprovingly. “Well, that’s not what your face said.”

I stand, pushing my chair back. “Which bar does she work at? Do you know?” I ask. “I need to talk to her.”

Clay and Sophia both stand as well. “She only said it’s in Harlem.” Sophia scratches the back of her head.

“Just text or call her,” Clay says.

“I swear I am going to punch both of you. You don’t just text after something like this,” Sophia points out.

Clay places a hand on my shoulder. “Looks like we’ll be going on a bar-hopping adventure tonight to check some liquor licenses.” He winks at me.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

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### **Josh**

After the eighth bar in Harlem, Carolina is still nowhere to be found.

“Fuck!” I shout, tugging at my hair. “It’s already past one. What if she’s finished her shift? Why didn’t we ever ask her where she works?”

Clay exhales sharply. “Because we’re total idiots, remember? That’s why we’re doing this in the first place.”

“What’s the next spot? We’re continuing, right?”

“Of course we are.” He checks his phone and says, “Next up is that dive called Donny’s.”

I grimace. “Let’s hope we don’t catch an STD just by walking in.”

Clay chuckles as we head over, and thankfully, the drive is short. With each passing minute we don’t find her, my nerves rise to a new level.

He opens the grimy door for us. As we enter, I scan the poorly lit bar through the crowd of rowdy, drunk patrons and spot Carolina standing next to a tall blonde girl.

“Wa... sh out, the cops’re here!” a customer slurs loudly.

Both Carolina and the blonde turn their heads our way. Shock spreads across Carolina’s face before she swiftly turns and disappears through a door behind the bar.

“Yep, you fucked up.” Clay laughs beside me. “I’ll chat with the blonde. You go find our girl.”

I give him a sour look for referring to Carolina as ‘our’ girl but head toward the bar anyway. I wait until Clay starts flashing his dazzling smile at the blonde, who’s already giggling, and I slip through the door Carolina just used.

I find myself in a kitchen where two guys are staring at me.

“Carolina?” I ask. The bigger of the two guys nods in the direction of another door. I thank him and navigate my way through it to find her standing with her back to me in a corridor, her forehead resting against a locker.

“Carolina...” I begin, but she jumps, whipping around to face me.

“What are you doing here?” She hisses, surprise flashing in her eyes.

I close the distance between us, stopping when we’re just a few feet apart. “We’re doing rounds to check the liquor licenses of the bars in Harlem,” I say, and her face falls slightly. *Is she disappointed?* “Yeah...” I nod, looking directly into her eyes. “It’s a good cover, but it took us nine bars to find you.”

Her gaze widens in surprise. “Why?” she asks, her voice a whisper.

Carolina’s eyes start to well with tears, and a single one trails down her cheek. I reach out and gently wipe it away with my thumb as I step closer. She leans back against the locker, nowhere to go.

“Because that kiss meant everything to me. I need another one. I need a thousand more. And I still think that wouldn’t be enough,” I tell her, my gaze fixed on hers.

Her breath hitches as I gently tilt her chin upward and slowly close the distance between us. Our lips meet, the kiss tender at first, as I give her time to relax into my touch. Her hands move to rest on my hips, and I move my hand from her chin to cup her neck.

My tongue glides over her bottom lip, requesting entrance. Our first kiss had been sweet and innocent, but I want to explore her now.

*I need to taste her so bad.*

She complies, parting her lips to allow my tongue to meet hers. I can't help but suppress a smile when I feel how cold her tongue is.

It's adorable how she hesitates, unsure how to do this, so I take the lead, stroking her tongue with mine. She quickly picks up the rhythm, moving in sync. Then she hums into the kiss. The sound sends shivers down my spine, and I pull her even closer.

Finally, after what feels like an eternity, I pull back it, resting my forehead against hers and taking a moment to catch my breath. "That was two, at least nine hundred ninety-eight to go," I whisper, punctuating my words with a gentle kiss on the tip of her nose.

Her giggle fills the space between us. It is a sound I've never heard from her before but instantly fall in love with.

A voice laced with a strong accent interrupts us. "Is this officer giving you trouble, *carina*?" I turn and see that the voice belongs to one of the guys working in the kitchen I saw earlier.

Carolina shakes her head. "No, Matteo. I'm good, thanks." Her voice is firm, leaving no room for further concern.

He nods, leaving us alone again.

I release a long sigh. "I need to find a quiet spot for you where we won't be disturbed." I cringe. "I hope that didn't sound as creepy as I think it did."

She laughs before her face turns serious again. "I'm sorry about what happened earlier with Del Moro. I didn't mean to put you in such an awkward position."

*Is she seriously apologizing to me?*

I pull her closer to me. "You're apologizing? Carolina, I'm the one who should apologize. I messed up. I should've

defended you, whether you wanted me to or not. That asshole's opinion means nothing to me." I softly kiss her lips, unable to stay away now that I've had a taste. "Our first kiss deserved a better setting. I promise I'll make it up to you."

Her lips curl into a smile, making my heart flutter.

I check the time and ask, "When does your shift end?" It's already one fifteen.

"Usually, it depends on the customers. But I'd say I've got about half an hour left. Why do you ask?" she questions.

"You're always working this late?" I ask, surprised.

She shrugs nonchalantly. "Most of the time, yes."

"And on top of that, you're going to college, interning with my sister, and now working at the tattoo shop on Saturdays..." I pause, amazed. "When do you even sleep?"

Her lips curl up in amusement. "Why do you want to know when my shift ends, Josh?"

I brush a loose strand of hair from her face and tuck it behind her ear. "We could offer you a ride home?"

"But it's only three blocks." She laughs. "What are you going to do? Wait outside? That might affect my tips."

I chuckle in response. "No, we'll come back later to pick you up."

She rolls her eyes at me. "Three blocks."

I lean in, giving her a quick peck on the lips, and whisper in her ear, "Doorstep goodnight kiss."

Blushing, she manages a shy "Okay."

I brighten up immediately. "Really? Okay?"

She grins at me. "Yes, okay. Now get out before my boss catches me hanging out with cops," she teases.

I grin at her response, giving her one more quick peck on the lips before stepping back. "All right. I'll be back for you in half an hour, Carolina."

As I turn to leave, she calls after me. “I’ll be waiting, *Officer!*”

I chuckle, striding back toward the bar area, where I find Clay still charming the blonde girl. He spots me coming and gives me a raised eyebrow. I simply nod and head toward the exit.

He wraps up his conversation quickly and joins me outside. “So? How did it go?” he asks, glancing at me sideways.

“Good,” I say. “She agreed to let us pick her up after her shift.”

Clay whistles, “Nice, man. That’s progress.”

“I know,” I say, a grin spreading across my face. “Let’s get some coffee. We’ve got half an hour to kill.”

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## **Carolina**

Already having closed everything up, I’m waiting outside the bar when a police car pulls up in front of me.

Josh gets out and opens the back door for me. “My lady.” He grins as I slide in.

“How was your night, kitten?” Clay asks from the driver’s seat.

“Long,” I say, thinking about the rollercoaster of emotions I went through. “Yours?”

“Pretty entertaining, like a kitten scavenger hunt. Although I must say, some bars around here are just plain dirty.” I don’t miss the cringe in his voice.

I huff. “I bet Donny’s is the worst.” We quickly arrive in front of my building, and Josh gets out to open my door for me. “Bye,” I say to Clay, looking at him through the rearview mirror.

“Take your time...” he winks at me, “... and don’t forget, your tongue has to move counterclockwise.”

“What?” I blurt out, my eyes widening.

Clay turns in his seat to look at me. “I could give you some lessons so Josh doesn’t think you kiss like a dead fish. You know what happened with the guy who was into Sophia.” He’s obviously teasing, but a pit of worry sits in my stomach.

Josh leans in and gently grabs my hand, pulling me out of the car. “Don’t fill her head with your bullshit, Clay,” he says, closing the car door with too much force.

He guides me to the door with his hand on my back before he pulls me in with one arm and kisses my forehead, lips brushing against my skin. “Don’t listen to him. I fucking loved kissing you. I could kiss you all day. In fact, I think I promised a goodnight kiss.”

He takes my head in both his hands and brings his lips to mine, lingering for a sweet moment in a tender kiss. Then, he tilts my head a bit more and lets his tongue glide over my bottom lip. I open for him, and our tongues meet. I try to remember what Clay said about clockwise, but Josh breaks the kiss and pushes me against the door with his body, his knee pressing between my thighs.

“When I’m kissing you, I’m the only one you think about,” he whispers before diving back in, kissing me harder and more passionately than ever, making me forget everything. I’m dizzy when he breaks the kiss again, giving me one last peck before whispering, “Sleep well, my Carolina.”

“Night,” I manage to breathe out.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

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### Clay

On my way to Xander's shop, I collect coffees and bagels for everyone. It's eleven in the morning, but I know he's tattooing a friend of ours today, so I figure it won't be a big deal to drop by.

I couldn't sleep, and I've debated for a while if I should do this, but I have to do something, or I'll go insane.

Since Carolina started dating Josh, I've been feeling, I don't know, jealous? Not in a way that I'm not happy for them, but it's just that Carolina is completely occupied with him now. Whenever we're together, she's always talking to or looking at him, smiling and laughing like she never did with me before. It bugs me, and I miss our banter. I know it's stupid, but I consider her my new best friend and miss spending time with her.

So, I'm just going to ambush her while she's working at Xander's shop. At least she can't run away from me there, and Josh is still at home sleeping, so nothing will distract her.

I walk into the shop, and the door dings, signaling my entry. Carolina is leaning over the counter, jotting something down on a notepad. She glances up with a customer service smile, but the smile disappears as soon as she sees me.

"Oh, come on. Don't give me that vacant zombie look, or I might think you're out to eat me," I tease, smirking at her.

"Zombies eat brains, so you're safe," she says before returning her attention to her work.

Angela, who is getting tattooed by Xander, laughs from the back. “Ouch, what did you do to this girl, Clay?”

“Nothing. Best friends like to tease each other, right, kitten?” I say, but Carolina just maintains her neutral expression.

I place her coffee in front of her before heading to the back and giving Angela the coffee and bagel I bought for her.

“Thank you. I was getting a bit drowsy here.” *She* at least smiles at me.

“What are you up to?” I ask.

“Oh, just watching some classes I recorded for an upcoming test,” she says, shaking her phone.

I place Xander’s coffee in the not-sanitized zone and put a bagel beside it.

He stops for a second, looking up at me. “Hey, love. Thank you,” he says.

I lean down to kiss his temple. “Anything for you.”

“I didn’t know you were coming over. Is everything okay? Why are you awake?” he asks, setting down the tattoo machine and taking off his gloves to sip his coffee.

“I couldn’t sleep and thought I’d come say hi to you and Angela.” I shrug.

“That’s nice, but I’m sorry, this tattoo is taking longer than expected, so I don’t have time to chat,” he apologizes.

“Don’t worry, I’ll just bug your little assistant a bit,” I smile and lean down, kissing him before letting him get back to work.

Carolina is busy drawing on her notepad when I reach the front again. I sneak up behind her and peek over her shoulder to see what she’s sketching. It’s a stunning picture of an ice rink surrounded by trees, with the skyline in the background. There are silhouettes of people skating on the ice, and the main focus is on a pair of ice skates lying on the rink. She’s drawn it all with a pencil, but it looks impressive.

I can't help but ask, "How do you draw so well?"

Carolina startles. She didn't notice me coming up behind her. She tries to turn the notebook, hiding it, but I take it out of her hand and give it a closer look.

It's pretty.

"Give it back," she says, reaching for it.

"Tell me, and I will," I say, holding it over her head.

"My mother was an artist. We used to draw a lot when I was little. Now give it back," she demands, and I hand it back as promised.

"So, you're into art? Xander is too. You could be his new art buddy and go with him to exhibitions and stuff." Xander huffs from the back. "Not that I'm not enjoying them, but I'm sure it would be much more fun if you could talk about art while looking at it."

*Gosh, it would be a relief not to have to go to those stuffy things anymore.*

They stay silent, and it's starting to make my skin itch.

"Are you excited for tomorrow?" I ask, changing the subject.

She smiles a little and blushes, looking down at her drawing.

"I am," she says softly.

That smile and blush aren't for me, and it's driving me crazy. *Why, though?*

"It's going to be so much fun. After the ice-skating, we go home and eat Christmas cookies Sophia bakes, with some mulled wine Xander always makes for us. Are you down for that too?" I ask.

"I have to work in the evening, and I don't want to just barge in on all of your family traditions," she says.

"Nonsense, you're part of this now too. It would hurt our feelings if you don't come," I say, pouting.

“I don’t know,” she contemplates, sounding unsure.

“You’ll come,” Xander’s voice comes from the back, leaving no room for argument.

“Okay,” she whispers.

God, I would love to know if she would comply so easily if he told her to come when we were all in bed together.

*When?*

Fuck.

“So now that this is settled, what do you want Santa to bring you?” I ask.

“Are you serious right now?” She raises her eyebrows at me. I nod, but she huffs out, “Unlike you, I’m not twelve anymore.”

I hear Angela snicker, but I ignore her. “Okay, no Santa, then. But what are your wishes for Christmas? Josh and Sophia were talking about what they could get you, but I want to give you the best present since I’m your best friend. So, I just ask what you want,” I say.

Her eyes go wide. “They want to buy me something for Christmas?”

“We,” I correct her. “We are going to buy you something.”

“Please don’t.” She looks a little panicked.

“Why?” I furrow my brows.

“Just don’t,” she says, her eyes pleading with me.

I search her face, and it’s clear that she’s genuinely asking me not to.

“What’s the problem with Christmas presents?” I ask her.

Her bored mask slips for a moment, and she looks almost vulnerable. But then, she steps back, and her face shows nothing but indifference again.

“Nothing, I am just not a child anymore, and when you don’t know me enough to know what to get me, you don’t know me enough to get me a present in the first place.”

“It’s a beautiful day to get to know each other better.” I smirk at her.

“It’s a beautiful day to leave me alone,” she deadpans.

---

## **Xander**

As I’m changing the needles on the tattoo machine, Angela huffs and laughs. “I can’t decide if they love or hate each other. It’s like a verbal foreplay. Aren’t you worried?” she asks teasingly.

“It’s fine. They’re just friends and bickering,” I explain.

“Isn’t that like Clay’s love language?” she asks, her tone filled with humor.

But her words hit me like a punch to the gut. I glance over at Carolina, catching Clay smiling down at her.

“Xander, I’m sorry, I was just joking,” Angela quickly apologizes, “You guys are the perfect couple, and a blind man could see how much Clay loves you. I didn’t mean to make you worry.”

“You didn’t,” I say, trying to reassure her, but my mind is still spinning with her words. I hadn’t considered the possibility of Clay having real feelings for Carolina, and the thought leaves me feeling strangely unsettled.

Never in my life have I been unsure of Clay’s love. I am still not. What I am unsure about is the pint-size but fierce woman who brings stars to my boy’s eyes.

Clay has a thing for broken souls—Exhibit A, me. It’s like catnip for his hero complex. And Carolina screams broken and in need of a savior with every fiber of her being.

She is like a new moon to Clay’s sunshine. He will make it his mission to light her up and make her full again, consciously or not. The question is, can my abyss exist beside her? All I do is absorb his light, and given enough time, she will beam right back.

I finish Angela's tattoo and make small talk while I clean, then patch her up before we settle up out front. Clay and Carolina make room for us, and she leaves quickly with a smile and goodbye.

"You did amazing again, Xander. That looked so good," Carolina admires.

"Thanks," I say, not looking up from the tablet, checking when my next appointment should arrive.

I have fifteen minutes to clean up everything.

"I have to get home to get ready for work," Clay says. "Have a nice day, kitten." He winks at her.

"Have a day as pleasant as you are," she says.

Clay looks like he's about to reply, but I grab him by the throat, pull him close, and kiss him deeply before he can. My other hand squeezes his crotch while I bite his bottom lip hard.

"Mine," I nearly growl out against his lips.

I am not a jealous man, but I am fucking possessive. He can flirt all he wants with her, but not while I am standing right here, being ignored by him.

He breathes out, "Yours. Love of my life."

"Light of mine," I say, letting go of his crotch, my hand wandering from his throat to his cheek, cupping it and kissing him again, tender this time.

"I'll text you," Clay says before leaving the shop without glancing at Carolina.

When I look over at her, her face is red, and she averts her eyes.

*Is she blushing because she is ashamed of flirting with my boy or because she wants to be mine too?*

Fuck, can I really blame Clay for wanting more from her than just a quick fuck when I have the same fucking problem?

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

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### **Carolina**

Chiara and Leo are making out beside me as I stand in front of the ice rink, marveling at everyone having a blast skating.

I hope I don't look like that while kissing Josh. But Josh's tongue is not all over my face like Leo's is with Chiara, so we should be fine.

"Kitten!" I hear Clay yell and turn to see him walking up to us, holding hands with Xander, Sophia, and Josh following behind them.

"Did you have to wait long?" Xander asks, but I shake my head.

"We just got here too," I say. "Guys, this is Chiara, my little sister, and her boyfriend, Leo." I introduce. "Chiara, these are my..." I hesitate a second before saying, "... friends, Sophia and Xander. You already know Clay and—"

Josh walks over to Chiara and extends his hand to shake hers. "Hey, Chiara, it's great to see you again. I don't think I introduced myself properly last time. I'm Josh, Carolina's boyfriend."

My eyes widen almost as much as Chiara's do.

"Boyfriend?" she questions while shaking Josh's hand, and I feel myself blushing. She lets go of his hand and turns to Leo, whispering loudly, "He's way too hot for her."

“Hey! Hush. Your sister is just as hot as him, and at least she is respectful enough not to fuck him in your bed,” Clay snaps, tone angry.

“You told him?” Chiara’s tone is shrill.

“What?” Josh looks from Clay to me.

“Let’s go before all the skates are gone,” Xander offers, nudging Clay to lead the way.

Leo grabs Chiara’s hand and pulls her along, with Sophia giggling as she follows. Josh takes my hand to join them, and I look up at him, asking, “Boyfriend, huh?”

His dimples appear as he smiles down at me, and my stomach flutters.

“I thought that was pretty obvious,” he says.

“Well, no, I’ve never had a boyfriend, so I don’t know how all this works,” I admit as we reach a sort of bleacher where Sophia and Chiara sit, so I take a seat too.

Josh asks, “What’s your shoe size?” as he adjusts his beanie I’m wearing.

“Five and a half,” I say.

“You’re adorable,” he says, giving me a quick kiss on the lips before heading over to the entry stand with Leo, Clay, and Xander to pay and rent skates.

Chiara speaks up from beside me, “You could have told me you have a boyfriend now, Lina.”

“I would have if I had known.” I shrug, making Sophia laugh.

“Lina? That is cute. Can I call you that too?” she asks.

“Sure.” I smile at her.

The boys return from the rental station, and Josh hands Sophia her skates before coming over to me. He sets down his and my skates on the ground, then hands me a folded note and a pen. I give him a curious look, but he just smiles.

I unfold the note and read the words, “Will you be my girlfriend?” Below it are three checkboxes with *Yes*, *No*, and *Maybe* written above them.

My heart races as I look at him. He’s on one knee in front of me, and my eyes start tearing up. I always wanted someone to ask me like this when I was younger, but I was always left out. And now, this kind and wonderful man is giving me exactly what I’ve always longed for.

I take the pen and make an X under *Yes*, look back at him, and he smiles brightly, leaning in to give me a gentle kiss. He whispers against my lips, “My Carolina.”

Josh stands, handing me my skates, and sits beside me to put on his. I try to get my feet into the skates, but it’s a bit challenging. “How hard do I have to pull them?” I ask, feeling unsure.

“Wait, let me help,” he offers, kneeling in front of me again. He binds my skates for me, and as he finishes, he lets his hand slide up from my calf to my thigh.

“Are they feeling okay? Do they hurt?” he asks.

“They’re perfect. Thank you,” I say.

“Why aren’t you that cute?” Chiara pouts at Leo.

“Come on, doll,” he says, pulling her to her feet and onto the ice rink.

“Please, never call me doll,” I whisper to Josh as he helps me stand.

“Never.” He vows, taking my hand and helping me over to the rink.

---

## **Josh**

The first thing she does is almost fall on her perfect ass as her feet slip out from under her. I quickly grip her under her

arms and pull her close, ensuring she stays steady until she stands straight again, and we both chuckle.

“Off to a great start,” she mutters.

“I’ve got you,” I whisper reassuringly.

“That looks much easier than it is,” she admits, sounding a bit embarrassed.

“That’s true, but don’t worry, we’ll have you gliding around here like a little ice princess in no time,” I tease.

“More like an ice clown.” She huffs.

I guide her around the rink, holding her hand securely in mine. She wobbles and has my hand in a vice grip, but I can’t help but smile as I watch her determination.

“You’re doing great,” I encourage.

She looks up at me, and I can see a softness in her gaze. “That’s not true, but you’re cute. Thank you.”

I pull her to a halt on the side of the rink and close to me. Her hands go up around my neck, and I hold her hips. “I have the most beautiful girlfriend,” I say, kissing her. Her lips are so soft but cold, and I squeeze her hips, loving the feel of her. When I break the kiss, I gaze into those golden eyes. “Thank you for reminding me what butterflies feel like.”

Her cheeks turn a lovely shade of pink. Just then, some kids rush past us fast on the ice, and to protect her, I turn her away from them. But in doing so, she loses her balance and swivels so hard that I start wobbling too, and we both end up falling on our asses.

A sharp pain shoots through me, and I see her face scrunched up in pain too. She rubs her forearm. “Ouch,” she says.

“You okay?” I ask.

She laughs and says, “Why do I always land on my ass in front of you? I swear I’m not that clumsy.”

Xander glides over and gives me a disapproving look. “How can she enjoy this if you let her fall?”

“I didn’t let her fall. We both fell,” I argue.

Xander quickly puts his hands under her arms and lifts her back up to her feet before he pats her ass to get rid of the snow on her jeans. She looks up at him with wide eyes, and I clench my jaw.

“I’ll show you how ice-skating really feels and why it’s fun,” he says and starts skating while holding her under her arms, basically sliding her over the ice. She squeals with excitement, a sound I’ve never heard from her before.

“Hey, Joshy, need a hand?” Sophia asks as she glides over to me.

“Nope,” I snap, getting up and dusting off my jeans. “I wanted this to be a romantic date,” I say, a bit annoyed.

She snickers. “Well, you’d have to come here with her alone for it to be romantic.”

“True,” I agree, then start skating slowly with Sophia.



## **Xander**

“Xander!” She squeals as I push her in front of me, holding her tightly so I can keep her from falling on the ice even if she somehow trips. Falling on ice can be dangerous, and Josh risking her does not sit well with me.

“You’re like one of those plastic penguins kids use to hold onto when they’re learning to skate. So damn small,” I say.

“Why didn’t I get one of those, by the way?” she asks.

“I thought you told Clay you’re not twelve anymore,” I counter.

“You heard that?” she asks.

“Sure did.” I snicker.

“I’m sorry,” she says, the humor in her voice gone.

“Why?” I ask.

“I know it could come across wrong, but I swear I am not flirting with your boyfriend. I know he is with you and gay, it’s just—”

I smirk to myself. *Oh, he is going to love that.*

“It’s just that you guys are great friends, and the banter is fun. You found someone you can let loose with. I get that. Clay needed someone on his wavelength. I love that for both of you,” I say.

I stop and turn her around, my hold on her never wavering.

“You’re on my wavelength too. I don’t know what it is, but you make me feel calm and safe,” she says.

*Does she want me too?* No, she is not that stupid.

I gaze at her, and she starts to fidget. “Did I just say that out loud? Ugh, all this opening up lately is not good for my bad-bitch reputation,” she says, trying to brush it off.

“You don’t have to pretend with me, Carolina. Say what you want to or don’t. I get it. Because you are right. I feel it too.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

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### **Carolina**

After spending a couple of hours at the ice rink, we all head to the guys' place, enjoying some of Sophia's delicious cooking and trying the mulled wine Xander made for us. They even invited Chiara and Leo to join us.

It's warm and tasty, and Sophia's cookies are hands down the best Christmas cookies I've ever had.

After a while, Chiara and Leo decide to head to Leo's place, and Xander offers to drive them. As they leave, Clay and Sophia make their way over to the couch.

"Would you like to watch a movie with me in my room? I think I've shared you enough for today," Josh whispers in my ear as he comes up from behind, placing his hands on my upper arms.

I nod, and he takes my hand, leading me upstairs to his room, and I take a moment to look around. It's bathed mostly in soft blues, his bed is practically the size of our entire room at home, and everything is so neat and new.

My stomach churns. I've never felt like what Barbara would call a 'gutter rat.' I work hard for everything I own and take pride in that. But standing here in Josh's room, surrounded by all his nice things, I can't help but feel a bit out of place.

He moves around me and gently lifts my chin with his finger. "Hey, what's wrong? We can head downstairs and watch the movie in the living room if you'd prefer. I'm sure

Clay and Sophia would join us. Though, I was hoping to get some alone time with you.” His tone is soft and reassuring, and he strokes my cheek.

I inhale deeply, pushing aside the unease. “No, I’d like it to be just us. Your room is cool.”

“Thanks.” He grins, planting a quick kiss on my lips.

Josh turns me around and pulls me back against his chest, his arms draping over my shoulders. He rests his chin on my head, and we both gaze at his bookshelf loaded with books and movies.

“What would you like to watch?” His whisper sends a shiver down my neck, making goose bumps pop up.

“I don’t know. I haven’t watched movies for a few years. You pick something good.”

“Looking for something funny, action-packed, or romantic?” He stands straighter, running his hands up and down my arms.

“Surprise me,” I tell him, and he releases me, spinning me around by my shoulder so my back faces the bookshelf and television.

“No peeking,” he says, his voice laced with amusement.

As he picks out a movie, I take the chance to look over the rest of his room. I spot medals and trophies on a shelf next to his bed. Getting closer, I see they’re all from swimming competitions.

“You swim?” I ask.

“I do, but I no longer compete. Now it’s just something I do to clear my head,” he says. He comes over and takes my hand, leading me to the bed and pulling me to sit next to him. “Is this okay?” he asks as I settle in, leaning against the headboard with his arm draped around my shoulders.

I nod, but my heartbeat picks up its pace in my chest.

As he starts the movie, I recognize the actors, but their names escape me. It’s odd how disconnected you can become

when you don't have time for simple things like watching a movie.

We sit and watch for a while, Josh's fingers tracing patterns on my upper arm while I try to soothe my racing heart. My focus is entirely on his touch, not the film, when his other hand gently takes mine. It's such a small gesture, but it makes me shiver. I tilt my head to look up at him, finding him already watching me, a faint smile playing on his lips.

"Enjoying the movie?" he asks. I nod, to which he chuckles softly, letting go of my hand to cradle the back of my head and leaning closer. "You haven't watched a minute of it," he murmurs, his voice a gentle hum. I swallow hard and shake my head. "Neither have I," he admits before leaning in and kissing me.

His lips are incredibly soft, and the gentleness of his kiss sends my heart into a flutter, my stomach swarming with butterflies. As I part my lips, he deepens the kiss.

I'm still unsure if I'm doing it right, following his cues, but his low groan against my lips tells me he's enjoying it. His hands wander from my upper body to under my thighs, effortlessly lifting and pulling me onto his lap to straddle him.

Startled by the sudden move, I pull back slightly, staring at him.

"Too much?" he asks, brushing my hair aside so he can see my face.

It's not that it's too much. I'm just amazed at how easily he managed that. I'm not exactly a lightweight. I shake my head and lean back in to kiss him again. He grins into the kiss before pulling me closer and deepening it once more.

Somehow, in the middle of kissing, we slide down the bed until he's flat on his back, and I'm straddling his waist. My hands rest on his shoulders while his roam over my body, above my clothes. They squeeze my thighs before drifting upward to cradle my cheek.

Then, one of his hands slips down my body again and under my sweater, gliding over the side of my waist and

brushing against my belly rolls. I freeze, causing him to stop and lean back to look up at me.

“Everything okay?” he asks, worry flickering in his eyes.

Internally, I’m in turmoil. I don’t know how to do this. I never did stuff with a guy before. I want to do everything with him, but what if he thinks I’m weird? What if I mess things up? What if he loses interest when he sees or feels what’s hidden beneath my clothes? *How could he find someone like me attractive?*

“I don’t know,” I whisper, my thoughts spiraling out of control.

His concerned gaze softens as he reaches out, gently pulling me onto him and nestling my head under his chin.

“Why don’t we cuddle while you figure it out?” he offers, rubbing my back soothingly.

His rhythmic strokes and gentle breathing calm my frantic thoughts, and we lie there quietly. There’s a peace in his strong arms I’ve never experienced before.

“My Carolina,” he murmurs, planting a soft kiss on top of my head.

I pull back to look at him, and he smiles. “You can call me Lina if you want,” I offer, but he just shakes his head.

“You know, I looked up your name because I thought it was so beautiful, and I wanted to know what it meant,” he says, reaching out to stroke my cheek. “Carolina, beautiful.” I blush, attempting to look away, but he gently lifts my chin with his forefinger, guiding my gaze back to his. “I’ll never call you anything else because your name already captures everything you are. Beautiful...” he plants a kiss on my nose, “... strong...” he pecks my forehead, “... loved.” His voice drops to a husky whisper before he meets my lips with his.

I pull back from the kiss, my eyes wide. *Did he just say he loves me?*

“Josh...” I start, but he puts his thumb over my lips to silence me.

“You are it for me, Carolina. I get it if you need time, and I can wait. I’ve waited my whole life for you. I can wait until you’re comfortable with us, until you’re ready. I can wait forever if that’s what it takes. But I’m not going anywhere. You have me... all of me.”

Tears well up in my eyes so quickly I can’t hold them back. And I don’t want to. He just laid his heart on the line. I see it in his warm, brown eyes. He’s being sincere. It’s not some cruel joke, not a game, and he won’t bolt if I open up too much. It’s Josh, promising me that someone truly cares about me and that I can rely on him.

“You have me too,” I say, pulling him back into a kiss.

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## **Josh**

My heart flips at her words. I kiss her, wishing the kiss could show her how much she already means to me.

*Is it possible to overdose on happiness?*

I cradle her face, mindful of being gentle and considerate. I know she is inexperienced, and I should have thought about that before I spooked her earlier with my boldness.

I meant what I told her. I can wait forever if she needs me to. I want her to be ready for everything that could be between us. But God, I just got carried away. She is so fucking perfect, everything I’ve ever wanted. She is fierce, funny, and compassionate. And she is the perfect mix of cute and sexy.

I break the kiss so I can gaze into her golden eyes. She smiles softly at me, and before she knows it, I’ve gently flipped us around, so she’s now lying on her back with me hovering above her.

“I could kiss you forever,” I murmur, peppering kisses up her neck.

I love to see goose bumps rise in response and feel her shiver under my touch.

“Didn’t say you had to stop,” she murmurs breathlessly.

I can’t help but chuckle at that. “Oh really? I don’t think I could stop, even if I tried,” I confess, diving back in for another kiss.

After a few minutes, she gently guides one of my hands from the safe zone near her head and shoulders down her body to the edge of her sweater bunched up at her waist. My fingers brush against her bare skin, causing me to freeze in surprise and look into her eyes, searching her face.

“I meant what I said, Carolina. I can wait. Just having you here in my arms, being able to kiss you, it’s already more than enough,” I reassure her.

But she gazes up at me with those irresistible, intense eyes and whispers, “Touch me, please.”

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. *Fuck*. I was hard before, but now my cock is straining in my pants. Having that sassy mouth whisper such a plea for me is a heady feeling.

Gently, I slide my fingers under her sweater, caressing her silky skin. So soft, incredibly soft. I glance back up into her eyes and promise, “If you want to stop, all you need to do is say the word. I’ll stop immediately, no questions asked. We’re not doing anything you’re not ready for.”

Once again, all she murmurs is, “Please.”

My fingers trace patterns on her belly as my eyes hold hers, trying to read every tiny change in her expression. But all I see is the desire in her gaze. Gradually, I let my hand drift upward, taking my time and giving her every chance to say no. I pause just shy of her chest, my pulse racing in time with hers.

Carefully, I cup her breast over her bra, barely making contact while maintaining eye contact. Her breath hitches. Her bra is soft, and as my thumb lightly grazes across it, her hardened nipple presses beneath the fabric.

“Fuck...” I exhale as my thumb begins to trace small circles around her nipple.

Her eyes flutter shut, and she lets out a soft moan. Encouraged, I give her breast a gentle squeeze before returning to teasing her nipple.

Her breasts are big and full, and I've always had to resist the urge to stare at them. Now, having the privilege to touch them is driving me wild. I'm tempted to suck on her nipple, but I know that would be moving too fast.

"Josh," she breathes out my name, causing my gaze to snap back to hers.

"What do you need, Carolina?"

"More," she whispers, her eyes full of desire.

"More of what?" I ask, leaning down to nuzzle her neck with a soft kiss.

Responding to my question, she gently takes my wrist and guides my hand from her breast down toward the waistband of her jeans.

When she releases me, I stop, needing to make sure. "Are you sure, Carolina? I—"

"Touch me, Josh," she interrupts, a deep blush painting her cheeks.

I can't let her beg again.

She shouldn't ever have to beg for anything.

I unbutton her jeans, sliding my hand inside over her underwear. Through the fabric, her pussy is so soft, and my mouth waters. I stroke her and let my hand wander farther down until I find a wet spot. I groan, squeezing my eyes shut. My cock is so fucking hard it hurts.

"What?" she asks, a hint of uncertainty in her voice.

I lean in close, murmuring against her lips, "You're wet for me, and it's driving me crazy."

Then I claim her lips once more, pressing my finger down more firmly until I locate her clit. She breaks away from the kiss to gasp for air, her eyes meeting mine. I gently circle her

clit, and she lets out a soft moan. I desperately hope she'll let me bring her to the edge. I need to hear more of those sounds.

Maintaining a rhythm, I rub her and lean down to tease her neck with light bites. It seems to be the perfect combination because her hips lift off the bed and her fingers clutch at my covers.

"Come for me, Carolina," I whisper into her ear, sensing she's on the brink, but something seems to be holding her back.

I take a chance, sliding her panties to the side while keeping my gaze on her, watching for any hesitation or discomfort. Her eyes are hooded with desire, and her breath is heavy. My finger slips over her clit again, and she shudders.

She is so fucking soft and wet I have to bite my lower lip at the intense feeling. Visions of my cock slipping between her folds, sinking deep inside her, have me groaning.

Circling her clit, I apply a little pressure, then lean down, nipping at her neck. "Come for me, Carolina," I murmur again, letting my breath whisper against her ear.

It sends her over the edge, her thighs tightly squeezing my arm, which draws a growl of appreciation from me. "You're so fucking sexy. I'm lucky I didn't just come in my pants," I tell her, punctuating my words with a peck on her nose.

When she stops panting, I pull my hand from her jeans and bring my finger to my mouth, tasting her. Her flavor is addictive, and I close my eyes to fully savor it. When I open them again, she's looking at me wide-eyed.

"Everything okay?" I ask, brushing some hair from her face. She nods, her gaze dropping to the noticeable bulge in my pants. As she reaches for it, I stop her. "No, Carolina, this was just about you. You don't need to—"

"But I want to," she says, her cheeks coloring again. "I'm curious. I don't know what I'm doing, and I'm not sure I can make it as good for you, but I want to touch you too. Can I?"

*Fuck.* "I'm all yours. You can do whatever you want with me," I say, kissing her before reclining back on the mattress

and unbuttoning my pants.

She scoots over, and her hand hovers above me, carefully watching my every move until her eyes meet mine again. “I don’t know what...”

I take her hand, pressing a kiss to her palm before guiding it to my crotch, over my boxers, my cock rock hard. “Touch me. Hold me. Squeeze me. Do whatever you feel like doing.”

“What if I hurt you?” she asks, her voice filled with concern.

I can’t help but chuckle. “I promise you won’t.”

With my reassuring words, she seems to gain a little confidence. She slowly, tentatively takes me in her hand, her touch light over my boxers.

A sharp breath hisses through my teeth from finally having her hands on me. “See? You’re doing great,” I encourage her, my voice strained. “You can... you can go a bit firmer if you want.”

She takes my advice to heart and grips me, her hand moving up and down in an uncertain rhythm. I close my eyes, trying to focus on not coming right then and there, all because of her innocent touch.

It’s pure bliss, and in the back of my mind, I marvel that she chose me to be her first with this, to be the one who shows her stuff.

“Carolina...” I murmur her name like a prayer, overwhelmed by the sensations coursing through me.

*This girl is going to be the end of me.*

As she continues to touch me, she grows more confident, her movements becoming less hesitant, her rhythm steadier. She stops, but just to pull my boxers down and grip my cock without a barrier. “You’re so soft and hard at the same time,” she comments, and a low groan escapes me.

I reach over to cup her cheek, my thumb stroking her flushed skin. Pulling her closer, I capture her lips with mine, pouring all the feelings I have for her into the kiss.

Caught up in the heat of the moment, I weave my fingers through her hair, pulling her even closer. The taste of her lips, the scent of her skin, and the feel of her hand on me it's all too much, a sensory overload that's driving me to the edge.

She seems to be overwhelmed too, because her strokes get a little bit too fast.

“Breathe,” I manage to say between heavy breaths. “Take it slow... just... like that,” I direct, gritting my teeth with how good it feels.

My heart is pounding in my chest, my breath ragged. This connection between us goes deeper than anything I've ever known. I want this moment to last forever, to stay lost in her touch, in the rhythm of her hand moving against me.

I'm wasted on her in the way she grips me, and no matter how much I want to prolong this moment, I come with a strained groan. My hips jerk involuntarily with each jolt as I release into her hand.

My body trembles with the force of it, the moment leaving me breathless, my chest heaving as I try to regain some semblance of control. I rest my forehead against hers. “That was... amazing,” I manage to say between panting for breath, my voice hoarse.

When I lean back to look at her, the look in her eyes is one of pride mixed with a sweet innocence that takes my breath away all over again. She's truly perfect in every sense of the word, and I am the luckiest man alive.

I'm just about to get up to get her something to clean up with when she brings her hand to her mouth, licking it. I moan, nearly coming again just from watching her taste me.

“Carolina, you don't—”

“You taste good, salty but good,” she states, and I stare at her in disbelief. “Do I taste good too?”

I let out a huffed laugh before leaning in to kiss her again, tasting myself on her tongue. “You taste like the dessert I could eat for the rest of my life,” I whisper.

I pull my boxers and pants back up and lay down, drawing her close so her head rests against my chest.

“What does your name mean?” she asks after a while, drawing circles on my forearm with her finger.

“My full name is Joshua,” I say with a laugh. “My mom thought it sounded pretty American. She wasn’t too thrilled when people started shortening it to ‘Josh,’ but eventually, she caved and did the same. As for its meaning, I have no fucking clue.”

“I like Joshua. It’s a beautiful name,” she murmurs, and I reward her compliment with a kiss on her forehead.

“You’re the only one who gets to call me that,” I whisper, pulling her closer.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

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### **Carolina**

“Hey,” I greet, stepping into the lab.

College is on winter break, so I spent my free time today on chores like grocery shopping and laundry. Normally, I take on another part-time job over the holidays. However, thanks to the generous pay from the NYPD, I told myself I don’t need to do that this year.

I hope Sophia has something good to distract me, or I will just think about Joshua and his fingers the whole day. I already did it the entire morning, *so why not just continue?*

I smile down at my phone and read the text he sent me earlier again as I walk over to my desk.

Can't stop thinking about you. I want you back in my bed and arms. You have no idea how much you already mean to me.

“Carolina,” Sophia says, her tone serious like I’ve never heard it before.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” I ask.

“I checked the file for your parents,” she says, putting a damper on the butterflies still fluttering in my belly.

I freeze, my phone nearly slipping out of my hand before I place it on my desk. “You did?”

She nods. “I’m not sure if you’ll like what you see. Are you sure you want to do this?” Her voice is filled with genuine

concern.

“I am,” I state, taking a deep breath and bracing myself for whatever she has to share.

Sophia brings the file from her desk and stands in front of me, handing it over. As I open it and scan its contents, my heart aches as I see my parents’ names. There are pictures from the car wreck, and it looks terrible—the front of the car seems to be completely destroyed. They crashed against a building at high speed.

“I took out the more explicit pictures. You don’t have to see that,” Sophia says with sympathy.

I nod, grateful. *I don’t think I could have handled seeing those.*

I skim over the report, finding the toxicology screening they did. There it is, clear as day. There was a significant amount of heroin found in their blood, and there’s no room for doubt about the results.

“This can’t be right,” I say, reading over that part again and again.

“I’m sorry, Lina,” Sophia says, her voice gentle. “I checked the results multiple times, looked at it from every angle possible. They were under the influence when they crashed.”

“No,” I whisper, looking up at her, tears streaming down my face.

She takes the file from my hands and places it on the desk before pulling me into a comforting hug. “I’m so sorry.”

That night floods back to me clear as day, stopping me in my tracks.

*The soft glow of the television illuminates the dim living room.*

*I finally managed to get Chiara to sleep after what felt like hours of bedtime stories. It’s been ages since I’ve had the television to myself, and tonight, with Mama and Papa out*

*celebrating their wedding anniversary, I can finally indulge in the movie I wanted to watch for so long, but my dad found it silly.*

*I settle on the couch and pull the blanket over my legs, pressing play.*

*Just as the opening credits begin to roll, the doorbell rings. I frown, glancing at the clock. It's past nine.*

*Who could it be at this hour?*

*Hesitation grips me, but curiosity wins out. I pause the movie and make my way to the door, opening it just a bit to see who is on the other side.*

*Two police officers stand there, their uniforms crisp and badges shining. Behind them, a man in a plain suit, presumably a detective, and a woman with kind eyes and a gentle demeanor. The officers look stern, their expressions grave. But the woman offers a small, sad smile when she sees me.*

*"Ms. Costa?" one of the officers asks, his voice deep and authoritative.*

*I open the door wider and swallow hard, my voice shaky. "Y-yes, that's me."*

*The officer takes a deep breath, his gaze never leaving mine. "I'm sorry to inform you that there's been a car accident. Your parents... they didn't make it."*

*The world stops. My heart feels like it's been ripped out of my chest. The words echo in my ears, but they don't make sense. This can't be happening.*

*Not tonight.*

*Not ever.*

*The detective steps forward, his voice a distant murmur. "We have some questions about your parents if you're up for it."*

*But I can't hear him. Everything is muffled as if I'm underwater. A ringing sound grows louder in my ears,*

*drowning out everything else. My vision blurs, the edges of my sight darkening.*

*Suddenly, a warm hand touches my shoulder, grounding me. I blink, my focus shifting to the woman who has stepped closer. Her eyes are filled with compassion and understanding.*

*“It’s going to be okay,” she whispers, her voice gentle. “We’re here to help. I am going to stay with you girls until your next relative is able to get you.”*

*But nothing feels okay. The weight of reality crashes down on me, and I’m left grappling with a world that has suddenly turned upside down.*

*“Lina?” Chiara stands in the doorway to our room, wearing her pink pajamas with little hearts on them, rubbing her sleepy eyes. Her hair is wild.*

*A sob breaks out of me.*

How in the world am I going to explain to her that they’re gone?

“Carolina, are you okay?” Sophia asks, and I shake my head, trying to rid the memory of that tragic night.

Howie asked if I was ready to hear this all over again. And I was sure I was. But reading it again, in black and white, with no room for argument, has me shaken.

---

A couple of hours later, I’m still feeling overwhelmed. I’m convinced this has to be a mistake. I just know in my gut that my parents did not take heroin. But now, the question is, why does the file tell something different?

I’m so lost in my thoughts that I nearly jump when a finger strokes my cheek.

“Hey, it’s just me,” Joshua says, standing beside me at my desk.

“Hey, sorry,” I say, standing to hug him.

“How are you?” he asks, looking into my eyes and gathering my hair behind my head.

“Confused, I—” I start to say.

“Because you don’t know if you want this? Was it too soon? Fuck, I knew I should’ve waited. I promise I can take it slow with you. I can wait. I—” He starts to ramble, but I stop him by pulling him down to me by his uniform and kissing him on the lips.

He freezes for a moment, surprised by the sudden gesture.

I let go of him. “What are you even talking about?”

“I don’t know, I thought you were about to break up with me,” he explains hesitantly, and I can see the hurt in his eyes.

“What? No, of course not! Why would you think that?” I ask, genuinely surprised.

“Well, we did some stuff yesterday that I really enjoyed, but maybe it was too much too soon, and—”

“What makes you think I wanted to break up with you?”

“I texted you, and I know you’re not big into texting, but I got nothing back, not even a damn emoji. Just nothing. I thought you were ghosting me.”

*Fuck, I feel terrible.*

“Joshua,” I say softly, taking his head between my hands and bringing it down to mine so our foreheads touch. “I loved what we did yesterday, and I’m looking forward to doing it again,” I whisper.

He closes his eyes and lets out a breath. “Fuck. Okay, sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry. I didn’t want to send you a fucking emoji in response to your sweet text. I wanted to tell you how much I enjoyed it and how much you mean to me too, but I wanted to do it in person,” I assure him, kissing him gently.

“A short text like ‘I’m going to tell you later’ would have helped.” He smiles.

“I couldn’t do that,” I say, and he looks puzzled, so I take out my phone, open the messenger app with his name, and hold it out to him. “Text yourself something.”

He takes the phone and starts pressing on the screen, soon realizing the problem. “So that’s why we’ve been sending only emojis back and forth?”

He started sending me whole stories with just emojis since I only answered him with them. It was funny, but I should have told him earlier.

I grimace. “I’m sorry, I can’t afford a new phone right now. Maybe after Christmas. But I swear, I am not going to dump you, and I am really, really happy with how things are between us.”

He leans back down, kissing me again. “Me too,” he whispers with a smile.

---

“Costa! Did you leave your head at home today? Table three,” Lennard snaps, pushing a plate at me from the kitchen.

“Sorry,” I murmur, quickly serving the plate before returning behind the bar.

My head is spinning as I try to make sense of the evidence I saw today. The more I think about it, the less it adds up.

*How could my parents have been driving with such a high amount of heroin in their system?*

They were going out to eat, celebrating their anniversary. They were dressed up and had a reservation at a restaurant. It doesn’t make sense to me that they would take that much heroin right before going out.

If I try to look at it objectively, the results are clear, and there’s nothing to dispute. But everything I remember about that evening and my parents tell a different story.

*It just doesn't add up.*

I'm wiping down the counter with a cloth when a new patron walks in and sits in front of me. His eye is swollen shut, and his white shirt is tainted with blood. I look at him with wide eyes.

"You should see the other guy," he jokes. "Give me a beer, please," he says, and I quickly pour one, placing it in front of him on the counter.

"Do you need something for that?" I ask, gesturing to the blood on his shirt.

"Nah, don't worry. That's not my blood." He shrugs.

His words hit me like a ton of bricks, and I gasp.

"It's not their blood," I whisper to myself.

I was so fixated on checking the evidence that I did not check the blood type.

"What did you say, Shorty?" the guy asks, but I turn and nearly run through the kitchen, heading back to my locker. I grab my phone and call Sophia.

"Hello?" she answers groggily, and I realize I probably woke her up.

"Hey, fuck, I'm sorry I shouldn't have woken you," I apologize.

"Carolina? What's wrong?" Sophia asks, sounding more awake now.

"Did you see what the blood type was for the blood that was tested for my parents?" I ask her.

"Uhh... yes. I think they were both O positive, why?" she says.

"It's not them!" I nearly yell.

"Lina, what do you mean?" she asks.

"It can't be them! I don't know what their blood type was since I never asked when I was a teen, but Chiara and I are both A positive."

I hear some rustling on her end before she responds, “And are we sure you guys aren’t adopted or anything? I had this one guy in my biology class in high school who found out like this, he—”

“No, I’m sure. Chiara and I are spitting images of my mother. And I have enough of my father’s features to know he’s mine,” I tell her.

There’s a moment of silence on the other end before she speaks again. “So you think the case has been tampered with?”

“Yes! This is what I’ve been telling everyone for five years, and now there’s proof,” I exclaim, my emotions bouncing all over the place.

“Okay, don’t jump to conclusions just yet. I know you want this badly, but we need to stick to the facts,” she cautions. “We’ll talk about this tomorrow. I’ll check some things and maybe ask some colleagues for their input.”

“Thank you,” I whisper.

“See you tomorrow, Lina.”

## CHAPTER FORTY

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### **Carolina**

To avoid sitting on the cold concrete, I let my backpack fall to the ground before taking a seat. It's lunchtime, but the winter chill is still in full force.

"I was at the shelter, and you weren't there," I say to Howie, handing him a burger package and a Coke.

"Thank you," he replies, giving me a nod. "It may sound dumb, but I missed this place. The shelter is warm and all, but..."

"But it's not home," I finish his sentence.

He huffs. "Home is something I haven't known for a long time."

"Same," I admit, and he glances over at me.

"How is your arm?" he asks.

"Better," I reply with a slight shrug, trying to downplay the situation. However, the angry red hue of the skin around the cuts is hard to overlook. Despite my best efforts to protect the wounds, they seem to have become infected, making the area tender to the touch.

Changing the subject, I say, "I got my first paycheck last week. The NYPD pays well."

"That's nice, Lina. I'm proud of you. But you don't have to get me a Coke just because you earn more now," he says, taking a sip. "Although I do appreciate it."

I smile. “I should get you something warm to drink in this cold weather, but you only like Coke, so...”

He chuckles, “It’s fine. But you didn’t tell me that to brag, did you?”

I smirk. “Maybe a bit. But no. They offered me a job after college, and if they pay their interns well, they’ll surely pay their full-time workers even better, right?”

“I still hear you just bragging. Justified and well-deserved, but what are you saying, kiddo?” Howie asks.

“I’m asking you to hold out. Hang in there with me. Two more years, max, Howie. I’m going to save every penny I earn and don’t need to live, and the second Chiara turns eighteen, I’m going to rent an apartment for us, and we’re out of here.”

“I love that for you,” he replies with a smile.

“Howie, you’re not listening,” I say, gently taking his free hand in mine. “Hang in there for me, and I’m going to build us the home we haven’t had for so long. You told me yourself, we’re family. And as much as I would never leave Chiara behind, I won’t leave you behind either,” I say earnestly.

“Lina, I’m just baggage no one needs,” he murmurs.

“I need you,” I whisper.

Thinking about the new home I envision for us, memories of the initial weeks after losing the only home I had ever known start flooding back.

*The room is thick with tension, the air heavy with the stench of alcohol. Roberto’s eyes are bloodshot, his face contorted with anger and frustration. I can see the hunger in his eyes, not just for food but for an outlet for his rage.*

*I’ve been trying to avoid him all day, hoping he’d pass out from the alcohol. But hunger has a way of keeping even the drunkest man awake.*

*Chiara is sitting at the breakfast table, doing her homework, trying to stay invisible. But she’s too young, too*

*innocent to understand that sometimes invisibility isn't enough.*

*"Why's there no food in this house?" Roberto slurs, his voice rising with every word.*

*I swallow hard, trying to find my voice. "I'm sorry. I'll try to get some tomorrow."*

*Hopefully, I will make some tips tonight, or I won't be able to keep that promise. I had to pay rent for the first time on my own two days ago, and it was more than I anticipated.*

*He turns his gaze to Chiara, and my heart stops. "You! You eat all the food, don't you?" he accuses, pointing a shaky finger at her.*

*Chiara's eyes widen in fear, and she shakes her head frantically. "No, zio."*

*But Roberto is beyond reasoning. He lunges at her, his hand raised to strike. Without thinking, I step in between them, grabbing his arm. "Don't you dare touch her!" I shout.*

*His eyes, filled with fury, lock onto mine. "You think you can stop me?" He sneers.*

*Then, his fist connects with my face. Pain explodes in my cheek, and I stumble back. He has spewed shit at me since we moved in a few weeks ago, but it's the first time he has hit me. And somehow, I already know it won't be the last time.*

*I pull Chiara to her feet with me, and rush to the bathroom. I lock the door just as Roberto's heavy footsteps approach. Chiara's sobs fill the small space as I slide down the door, pulling her onto my lap. She buries her face in my neck, her tears hot against my skin.*

*Outside, Roberto's angry shouts and pounding on the door echo through the apartment. But I hold Chiara close, whispering words of comfort into her ear. "It's going to be okay, piccola," I promise, even though I'm not sure if I believe it myself. "I am never going to let him hurt you. I promise."*

*Minutes feel like hours, but eventually, the banging stops. The apartment falls silent, save for our heartbeats. I take a*

*deep breath, trying to calm my racing heart.*

*We're safe.*

But for how long?

## CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

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### **Carolina**

It's been half an hour with still no sign of Sophia. I look at my phone again, wondering what the holdup is. Every other day, if she'd be running late, I'd just do something else and wait for her to show up. But today, my mind is fixated on the revelation I had yesterday.

I'm dying to have another look at the file and see if there are any other inconsistencies I might have missed from shock and narrow-mindedness.

Just as I contemplate whether to wait a little longer or look for her, I hear Sophia's muffled voice from outside the door in the hallway. She sounds agitated, so I quickly get up and walk over to the door, trying to listen in on the conversation.

"I said no, it was authorized," Sophia says.

"Who authorized it?" a deep male voice asks, and I strain to hear their exchange.

"It came from all the way up, so there's no reason to withdraw it now," Sophia says, her tone tense.

I notice that the door handle is pressed down, but the door isn't opening.

"This case is closed. There is no need to investigate or ask questions again. And I am authorized to withdraw the file if you use it for anything other than its intended purpose, as a reference," the male voice warns.

“No!” Sophia yells, and the door handle starts to slip from her grip. I quickly open the door to find an older version of Del Moro standing before Sophia. I haven’t seen his father in years, but they look so alike that it’s impossible not to recognize him.

He has a tight grip on Sophia’s wrist, the hand she holds the file with, and his dark eyes lock onto mine.

“Let her go, now,” I say, my phone firmly clutched in my hand.

His gaze shifts down to my phone before he finally releases Sophia.

“We were just talking, weren’t we, Lee?” Del Moro, Sr. tries to play off the encounter while Sophia glares at him, rubbing her wrist. “I still need to insist on taking the file back to the archive, as it is being misused. There have been young, promising toxicology workers here who were fired for less. It would be a shame if you lost your team and your job just because of a misunderstanding, wouldn’t it?” he taunts, keeping his eyes fixed on Sophia.

“Give him the file,” I say quietly.

Her head whips to mine, trying to tell me something with her eyes. “I’m not done with it yet.”

“We can’t risk your career over this,” I whisper back to her.

“Listen to her, Lee. Seems like Costa has more in her brain than her parents did,” Del Moro, Sr. says, snatching the file from Sophia’s hand before walking away, whistling.

“What was that?” Sophia asks, nearly yelling as we get back into the lab with the door closed.

“I could ask you the same! I won’t let you lose your job or position over a favor for me!” I yell back.

Sophia leans against her desk, her head falling back as she sighs heavily. “This whole case is so fucking suspicious. I’ve been going over it all morning, and while there may not be

concrete evidence, there are small things that just don't add up. I think you might be onto something."

My heart races. "What small things?"

"Yesterday, I was trying to identify if there was any error in the data collection or a formal mistake. I was so focused on that I didn't look at the bigger picture. I'm sorry for that," she says.

"What small things, Sophia?" I ask again.

"Anyone with that high a dosage of heroin couldn't have driven a car. They would have likely been knocked out. There's a witness who saw the car trying to avoid the crash, but the official report states that it drove right into the wall at high speed. And then there's your statement..." She pauses, her expression turning sad. "You told the police that your parents weren't drug addicts and were on their way to an anniversary dinner. But the report dismisses it, saying you were just a shocked child at the time and that there were signs of drug abuse."

"I was older than Chiara is now," I huff.

"These are small inconsistencies, but what stands out the most is the blood type. You're absolutely sure about yours?" Sophia asks.

I nod. "I'm sure."

"I'm so sorry we lost the file again. Now there are more questions than answers. Del Moro coming over here to snatch the file from us is suspicious as fuck too, especially since he was the detective on the case," Sophia says.

"He was?" I'm taken aback.

"You didn't know?" she furrows her brows.

"No, I talked to someone else, a tall black man." I try to recall, struggling to remember his name.

"Yes, Anderson. He's Del Moro's partner," she confirms.

"Fuck..." My head spins with the realization. "Why would he tell us to let it be? Why doesn't he want us to ask

questions?”

“I have no idea,” Sophia sighs.

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Shaken by what happened earlier, I try to focus on our work, but it proves difficult. Del Moro, Jr. is already a nightmare to deal with, but his father is a whole different level of terrifying. I do my best not to let my fear show, but what just happened confirms my suspicions that someone is trying to hide something about my parents’ deaths. It only makes me want to dig deeper, even if it’s dangerous.

I need to figure out how to continue and get Sophia’s help without putting her in harm’s way. The situation is risky, but I can’t let it go.

It’s nearly time to go to the bar when we sit at our desks, discussing the results of the tests we made today. Joshua comes in smiling but focuses on me as he approaches my desk. “Hey.”

“You guys are late today. Wait, where’s Clay?” Sophia asks.

“He had to report to Swanson for a little longer,” he says, placing a package wrapped in black paper in front of me.

I look at it curiously. “What’s this?”

“Happy belated birthday...” he says, but then smiles and adds, “... or would you prefer early Merry Christmas?”

“Neither,” I say honestly.

His smile falters a bit, making me feel guilty. Reluctantly, I open the package and find a brand-new phone inside.

“What did you do?” I whisper, looking up at him in horror.

“You needed a new phone. Yours is broken, and you can’t go around with a broken phone,” he says casually.

“And what made you think you needed to buy me one?” I ask, my agitation growing.

“You told me you couldn’t afford it right now, and I can. Why shouldn’t I help? I care for you,” he counters, sounding a bit defensive.

“I don’t need anyone swooping in to take care of me,” I say, standing and grabbing my backpack. “If being with someone who doesn’t have enough money for new things isn’t good enough for you, then I’m not good enough, and you should look elsewhere.”

“That’s not what this is,” Josh starts, but I’m already heading for the door. “Fuck, Carolina, wait!” he calls after me, following me and grabbing my forearm to make me stop.

Pain shoots through me, and an “Ah” slips out of my lips, face scrunched up.

He lets go of me immediately, “What—” he starts.

“Don’t,” I warn, glaring at him.

It’s enough to make him step back, and I leave without another word from him.

## CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

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### Joshua

Our shift is over, and we're parked down the street from the bar Carolina works at. I couldn't bring myself to drive home. I need to talk to her, but I want to wait until she finishes her shift. It wouldn't be right to barge in while she's working to discuss our personal stuff *again*.

We watch as the last patrons leave the bar, followed by her blonde coworker and a shorter man with a beer belly, who walk out arm in arm. I watch as Carolina locks the door behind them through the glass entrance.

It's now or never.

"Do you think this is a good idea?" Clay asks, his concern etched on his face.

I furrow my brows. "What do you mean? I need to apologize. I messed up."

He tilts his head, studying me. "Do you truly believe that? Or are you just saying sorry to avoid her being mad at you?"

His words make me pause and consider his perspective. I can see where she's coming from, but I don't think I'm entirely in the wrong. She needed help, and I provided it. It's her pride that's standing in the way.

"If you go in there without being fully ready to acknowledge you are in the wrong, this could blow up, and we don't want that," he says.

"So, what do you suggest I do?" I ask, feeling torn.

“I think I should talk to her first, gauge her feelings a bit. Right now, she needs a friend more than a boyfriend. Look, I’ll call you and put my phone in my pocket so you can hear our conversation. What do you think?” Clay asks.

“I’m pretty sure that’s illegal, and if she finds out, she’ll feel betrayed. I don’t want to do that,” I say, biting my lip.

“Fine, do what you want. I’m going to call you, and you can decide if you want to pick up,” Clay says, getting out of the car and making his way toward the bar.

Halfway there, my phone starts ringing. If I’m honest with myself, I need to know what they’re going to talk about, even if it’s wrong. I pick up the call, put it on speaker, and watch through the car window as Clay puts his phone in the pocket of his uniform pants, muffling the sound slightly, but I can still hear the knocking on the glass.

Carolina comes to the door and opens it slightly, her voice muffled through the speakerphone. “What are you doing here?” she asks.

“Let me in. I thought maybe you needed someone to talk to,” Clay says, his tone gentle without his usual humor.

“It’s nearly two in the morning,” she points out. “Did Josh send you?”

Josh, not Joshua. *That’s not a good sign.*

“No, I genuinely thought you needed a friend, and since we’re the best of friends, I’m here,” Clay says, the smirk back in his voice.

“Whatever, I need to close up in the back. Come in,” she says, stepping away from the door and allowing him entry.

They move out of my view after she locks the door behind them, but I can still hear their conversation through the phone.

“Are you alone?” Clay asks, and there’s a rustling as if they’re walking.

“The kitchen staff just left. I’m usually the one who closes up and leaves last,” she says, and my stomach sinks.

It's dangerous for her to be alone at this time. Closing up is when most robberies happen, and she's a woman, alone.

"That's pretty dangerous," Clay echoes my thoughts.

She huffs in annoyance. "What do you want, Clay? I'd like to get some sleep before I have to get up in a few hours."

I grip the steering wheel tightly, my worry intensifying as I hear how agitated she is.

"Let's sit down. You can tell me what happened." Clay's voice becomes even more muffled, making me guess he's taken a seat.

"What's your poison? I need a drink for this," she says, and my heart aches.

*Is it that bad?*

"How about some vodka shots?" Clay suggests, and the sound of glasses being set on a surface immediately follows. "Cheers," Clay toasts, glass clinking before I hear Carolina cough. "Now, tell me everything."

"So you can run to your best friend and spill exactly what I said?" There's a hint of hurt in her voice.

"No, you're my best friend too, remember? I'm Switzerland. I just know you need to talk, and I want to be there for you. I won't tell Josh," Clay reassures her.

I furrow my brow, wondering why he would lie to her like that. This will only make things worse.

"Promise?" she asks.

"Promise," Clay says, and the line goes dead.

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## **Clay**

After ending the call, I put my phone back into my pocket, fully aware that Josh will be angry with me. But I can't bring

myself to regret it. I see the pain in Carolina's eyes. She truly is my best friend, even though it's new.

If Josh asked me to keep a secret, I would do the same for him. He'll just have to get over it.

"Spill," I say, grabbing the vodka bottle and refilling our shot glasses.

We're sitting beside a table facing each other. Carolina takes the glass, tilts her head back, and downs the shot in one gulp before having another fit of coughing. I laugh. "Do you even drink?"

She wipes her mouth with the sleeve of her black hoodie. "Nope, this is my first time ever."

My eyes widen. "You're twenty-two and working at a bar."

She points a finger at me. "Exactly. I see every day what alcohol does to people."

My thoughts drift to the evening we watched as she struggled to drag her drunk uncle home, and my stomach sinks.

*This might not have been the best idea.*

Carolina reaches for the vodka, but I quickly grab the bottle and place it on my side of the table, out of her reach.

"Hey!" she protests.

"Spill, Carolina," I insist.

She bites on her bottom lip, and I reach out to pull it gently from between her teeth with my thumb. She looks up at me with those mesmerizing golden eyes, and I can see the hurt in them.

When I withdraw my hand, she lowers her gaze to the table, fidgeting with her shot glass. "I'm not a fucking charity case," she mutters.

I nod. "I know. You've said that before."

"Then why does he feel the need to buy me a phone? I could manage just fine without him. I don't need a man to

provide for me, only to use it against me during fights or when he wants something in return.”

My eyes widen in disbelief. “Tell me you know that Josh would never do that because this is ridiculous. He bought you that phone because you needed it, and he couldn’t bear to see you in need when he had the means to help. And I know you know that too. You mean the world to him, and judging by the way you look at him, he means the same to you.”

She nods, her voice barely above a whisper. “I know. *Dio*, I know. But everything has a price. Just because you don’t see the price tag now doesn’t mean it won’t come crashing down on you in the future.”

This girl must have been through more shit than I could imagine. Her strength is both awe-inspiring and heart-wrenching. She glances over at the vodka bottle, and with a hesitant sigh, I pour another round of shots for us.

We clink glasses once more before downing the liquor, her coughing only slightly this time.

“Look, I may not know your entire story, and I understand that there might be reasons why you feel the way you do,” I start. “But I promise you, no, I swear, Josh would never, under any circumstances, hold anything against you. Even if you two were married and you decided to elope with me one day, he would be heartbroken and devastated, but he would still wish you happiness because that’s the kind of person Joshy is.”

She nods. “I think so too. I just thought he was too good to be true.”

I can’t help but snicker. “Josh *is* too good, but he’s also true.”

Her eyes roll before her demeanor turns serious again. “It’s hard to open up and let someone in. All I’ve ever done is shut people out, trying to survive this shit show of a life.”

“Carolina...” My heart aches for her.

“I’m tough, dammit,” she whispers, tears brimming in her eyes.

“I know you are,” I assure her, gently tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “You’re the toughest little kitty I know,” I add with a sad smirk.

She lets out a sigh, her voice trembling. “I can take care of myself. I’ve been doing it for years.”

“You have,” I say, “And you still do. Fuck, you always will. We’ve just joined in now too. We’re a family, and we care for each other. It was wrong of him to sweep in without asking, overwhelming you, but honestly, Carolina, the days you had to fight on your own are over. We are here now, and we aren’t going anywhere. Better get used to it quickly.”

“The last time I didn’t feel alone was five years ago,” she confesses.

“Is that when your parents passed away?” I ask, already sensing the answer.

She nods. “Car crash.”

I reach for her hand, taking it in mine and gently stroking the back of it.

“My mom passed some years ago too,” I share. “Cancer.”

“I’m so sorry, Clay,” she says, her eyes filled with genuine sympathy.

“My father was never in the picture anyway. I know what it feels like to be the child of no one,” I say softly.

Tears well in her eyes once more. “Life can be so fucked up and unfair,” she mutters.

“Agreed,” I commiserate, refilling our shot glasses before clinking them together again. We throw back the shots, and I feel the warmth spread through my body. “Ugh...” I say, feeling the pleasant buzz. “Life is way too short to fight over stupid shit, though, too.”

She nods, tears still making their way down her face. “Seems like I’m the one who needs to apologize to Joshua.”

I use my thumb to wipe away one of them from her cheek, marveling at how shiny her eyes are now that they glisten with

tears. Her cheeks are flushed, and it's evident that the vodka is hitting her faster than it is me.

"True, but let's let him stew a bit longer. You overreacted, but he messed up in the first place," I say with a casual shrug.

The warmth in my stomach spreads throughout my body, making me feel cozy. I push up the sleeves of my uniform, revealing my forearms. Her gaze follows, and she reaches out to turn my left wrist, examining the inside of my arm.

She bursts into laughter. "*Dio*, Clay, what is this? It's the worst damn tattoo I've ever seen. Is that a lion?"

I smile at her, unable to hide my amusement. "It sure is."

She traces the tattoo with her fingertips, causing goose bumps to rise on my skin. "Why?" she asks, peering up at me through her lashes, and my heart races in response.

"This was Xander's very first tattoo on human skin," I say, a smile playing on my lips. "He needed a guinea pig and promised to cover it up once he got better, but I love it. I love my man, and I'm so damn proud of where he came from. I could never get rid of this."

She smiles at me with warmth in her eyes, and I hold up my other arm next to it. "This lion he did last year, a little bit of progress, don't you think?"

"Wow," she breathes out, her gaze fixed on my two lion tattoos. One resembling Mufasa after the wildebeest stampede, and the other a stunningly realistic lion that could have jumped out of a *National Geographic* documentary.

"I understand why you kept it. It's so special and cool," Carolina says, her eyes meeting mine. "Just like you, Clay. You're so special, and I'm so happy you didn't let me get rid of you."

I chuckle. "Jesus, kitten, are you already that drunk?"

"Drunk or not, it doesn't make it any less true," she whispers.

I shift my chair closer to hers, our knees touching, and gently rub hers with my hands. "I'm very grateful you didn't

kick my ass to the curb too,” I say with a grin.

Suddenly, she stands and pushes my knees wide so she can stand between them. She wraps her arms around my neck, holding me in a tight hug.

“Promise me you’ll never leave me,” she whispers, her voice filled with vulnerability.

I can’t stop the tears pooling in my own eyes as I squeeze her to me.

“Promise.”

## CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

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### **Carolina**

*What the fuck happened?*

I wake up and groan, my head pounding worse than when Roberto pushed it against the kitchen counter that one time. I manage to open my eyes and find myself in an unfamiliar room. It's pretty, mostly beige tones, but it lacks any personal touches, giving it more of a guestroom vibe.

“Good morning,” Joshua says from my right side.

I sit up, holding my head and whimpering. “Not so loud.”

“I’m whispering,” he replies, with a hint of humor in his voice. “Here, drink this.” He holds out a glass of orange juice and a pill.

I try to take it, but the smell of the orange juice makes me feel nauseous, and I have to cover my mouth with my hand.

“Over there.” Joshua points to an en suite bathroom. I quickly get up and rush over, throwing up in the toilet. He follows me and gathers my hair, holding it back as he starts rubbing my back. “Let it out. It makes the hangover shorter.”

Once I feel like I’m done, I flush before I sit back down next to the toilet. While I do feel a bit better, my mouth tastes of bile, and to top it off, Joshua witnessed it all. But instead of being disgusted, he’s wetting a washcloth and kneeling in front of me. Then he simply washes my face.

“Feeling a bit better?” he asks, concern evident.

“No.” I wince in response.

“Need to throw up again?”

“No, I just need to turn back time so you would not see me throwing up,” I say, covering my face with my hands.

“In good times and bad times, sickness and health,” he says with a touch of humor.

“We’re not married.” I huff, lowering my hands to my lap.

“Want to be?” He grins.

I look up at him, taken aback, but he just helps me up, guiding me over to the bed. After I crawl under the covers, he hands me the pill and the orange juice again. I take them, and after a moment of silence, I feel slightly better, good enough to remember that I messed up.

“I am so sorry,” I say, feeling a blush creep up my cheeks. “I overreacted. I have issues that you’re not responsible for, but you were the one who had to deal with them.”

“No, don’t apologize. It was my fault. I should have asked you. Honestly, it was just selfish. I bought you the phone and told myself it was for your sake because you needed a new one. But truthfully, I couldn’t stand texting you and not getting a response,” he admits, sitting on the edge of the bed. “I see how Xander and Clay text each other all day. And I’m constantly thinking about you. I’d talk to you twenty-four seven if I could,” he says, reaching out to brush hair out of my face. “But the next best thing would be texting each other from time to time during the day. I wanted that so badly that I overstepped your feelings on the matter. That was shitty of me, and I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I want to text you all day too,” I say, reaching for his hand. “Thank you for the phone. I promise to blow yours up with texts.”

He chuckles and leans down to kiss me, but I pull away, saying, “Ew... no, I just threw up.”

“True,” he says, giving me a gentle kiss on my temple. “You can take a shower if you feel like it. I got you a new

toothbrush and toothpaste, and there are some of my clothes in the bathroom. Chiara called earlier, so I answered your phone to let her know you are here.”

I sit up straight. “Fuck, what time is it?”

“It’s eleven. Sophia knows you’re not coming in today, and I guess your bar shift only starts in the evening. You should feel better by then,” he reassures me.

“But Chiara—”

“When I asked her if she needed anything, she told me she is ‘not a fucking baby.’ ” He chuckles.

*Well, that sounds like her.*

“So, just rest, sleep some more. Xander, Sophia, and I have to work. I need to go in early today because of a meeting. But Clay is just as out of it as you are, so someone is here when you need it. But text or call me anytime,” he says, leaning in again to kiss my forehead. “I wish I could stay here too, but one of us needs to get in for that meeting. I’m happy we’re good again. I couldn’t stand you being mad at me.” He smiles, and a flutter builds in my belly.

“I’m happy too.” I smile back before he closes the door, an unfamiliar emotion rolling over me.

*Happiness.*

When I glance at the nightstand, my phone sits right next to the package with the new one.

---

## **Clay**

My head feels like it’s splitting apart as I make my way downstairs to the kitchen to get a glass of water. I wasn’t even drunk last night, just a bit tipsy, unlike Carolina, who I practically had to carry out of the bar and into the car. I couldn’t let her go home in that state. Who knows what trouble she could have gotten into. So, Josh and I decided to take her to our guest room for the night. But this headache is

killing me. It's as though the vodka we had was cheap or something.

I thought Carolina would have left by now, so I'm surprised to find her standing in front of the open refrigerator when I enter the kitchen. She's wearing some of Josh's sleep pants, which are rolled up, looking cute as hell. But as my eyes travel up her short legs, I notice how her round, fine ass stretches the fabric to its limit. She reaches on her toes to grab something from the top shelf, and when she comes back down on her heels, her delicious butt bounces. *Fuck.*

I walk up quietly behind her and reach out to grab the package of eggs she was trying to reach. "You wanted this?" I ask, making her jump in surprise.

She turns, looking up at me with wide eyes. "I'm sorry. I feel like I need to eat something, or I'll get sick again, and I wanted to make us breakfast. Was that too much?"

I huff a laugh and place the eggs on the counter, walking around to sit on a barstool at the kitchen island. "Please, I need something to eat too. I think there's some bacon of Xander's in there."

I don't usually eat bacon, but I need something greasy.

I watch as she makes eggs and bacon, appreciating how she seems comfortable in our kitchen, like she belongs here.

She places a plate in front of me, saying, "*Buon appetito,*" before turning and eating hers while facing away from me.

"Move your cute ass over here and sit," I tell her.

She turns, hesitating for a moment, but comes over, struggling to sit next to me on the high stool. Slowly, she starts eating while I inhale my plate of food. "God, that's good, thank you." She just nods, and I ask, "How are you feeling?"

She chews before answering. "Better, but I still feel like laying around doing nothing."

"Oh, that can be arranged," I say, taking our plates to the sink before reaching out to hold her hand and leading her to our big couch.

I lay down on my back, opening my arms for her. “Come here.”

She comes easily, resting her head against my shoulder and snuggling into my side. Her arm drapes over my chest, and her thigh rests over my hips, hugging me like a little koala bear.

I place my hand on her thigh, stroking her gently over Josh’s sleep pants.

“Mmm... that’s nice,” she whispers, her voice and her thigh against me making me hard.

*Who would have thought a few vodka shots could turn her into a cuddly kitty?*

I pull her even closer, kissing her head, taking in the scent of Josh’s cinnamon shampoo. “I could do this for hours. You know what, let’s do just that,” I say, my lips lingering against her forehead.

After a while of me stroking her, she chuckles. “You know, ever since I saw *Clueless*, I always wanted to have a gay best friend.”

I freeze, looking down at her, which prompts her to lift her head.

“What?” she asks, puzzled. “You’re the one insisting that you’re my best friend,” she mumbles, blushing slightly.

I chuckle softly. “I am your best friend, but I’m not gay, kitten.”

Her eyes widen. “I’m sorry,” she quickly apologizes.

“For what?” I ask, resuming my gentle stroking.

“For assuming,” she whispers.

“It’s okay. I mean, I’m very much not straight either.” I snicker.

She pulls her thigh away from me, and it brushes against my boner, making her eyes lock with mine. “See?” I whisper. “Not gay.”

“Then this is very much inappropriate,” she says, moving to get up.

“Shut up, kitten, and come back here,” I insist, reaching out to pull her back down to me. “You just pushed your not-so-small tits nearly in my face. Of course, I got a boner. It’s a natural reaction. Don’t overthink shit. We just made plans to cuddle all day long, and I am very much determined to do just that.”

She relaxes back against me but doesn’t hold me like before. So I reach over to get her thigh back over me. “I need you right here,” I whisper to her.

She looks up at me, searching my eyes before her gaze lands on my lips.

*Fuck, I would still be the second guy she ever kissed, right?*

“Thank you for yesterday,” she says, her voice soft. “I don’t think I told you that. But it meant a lot to me that you came for me. Again.”

I hold her closer. “I will always come for you,” I promise, feeling a tingle in my chest as our eyes lock. “Fuck, kitten, I think I—”

“Don’t say it.” She stops me. “Let’s just lay here and tune the rest of the world out for a while.”

“I can do that,” I say, disappointed but willing to put away my feelings.

For now.

## CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

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### **Carolina**

“Chiara, no,” I say firmly, grabbing my backpack and heading toward the door to leave the apartment.

She had already bugged me about the same thing yesterday, and it was even more annoying then. My patience was already thin, thanks to the headache that made it even harder to deal with her. Somehow, I managed to drag myself to work, even with my head still pounding like a drum. The guys came over to take us to dinner and Joshua was being his usual adorable self, so I think we really are good again. Clay, on the other hand, was surprisingly quiet. He didn’t say anything, but that smirk of his spoke volumes.

“Please, Lina,” Chiara pleads again, making puppy dog eyes at me.

“You can make him a present instead. Remember those pretty bracelets you made for Monica and me last year? That’s cute, and he’s so in love with you, he’d gladly wear something you made,” I suggest.

“No, I can’t do that. It’s childish,” she protests.

“I don’t think so. In fact, I’m planning to make some of those bracelets for my new friends too, because I can’t afford to buy them Christmas gifts either. Remember, it’s the thought that counts. And I just don’t have a hundred dollars for you to buy him that skateboard. Besides, it’s winter, *piccola*,” I reason with her.

“But I love him, and he always gives me gifts. I think he’ll get me something big too,” Chiara says with a pout.

“Then be grateful and say thank you. Maybe you can give him a massage or something. Show your affection in ways other than buying stuff,” I suggest as we walk out of the building to the subway station.

“You don’t understand, Lina! You’ve never had a boyfriend before!” Chiara nearly yells.

“I have one now,” I say, stopping to look at her.

“And don’t think I haven’t noticed that new phone he got you. You lectured me about not letting a man buy me things, not letting Leo get me a new phone, but he can buy you one?” she accuses.

“This is different, Chiara,” I say, trying to explain.

“Oh, of course, because it’s you, right? You do whatever you want, and I have to follow your stupid principles that you don’t even follow yourself,” she snaps.

“Chiara, è abbastanza,” <it’s enough,> I hiss.

“But let’s see how your boyfriend likes your little bracelet in exchange for that fancy phone. I bet he’ll love it and won’t look for someone else who can buy him things. Oh, wait, you’ll just give him a massage, won’t you? Because I bet he’s not even getting sex from you,” she spits out before storming off.

I stand there, completely shocked and with my mouth open.

*What just happened?*

---

“Here,” Joshua says, placing a bottle of water in front of me as he sits next to me at our usual table in the cafeteria, bringing me out of my thoughts. The day went by fast, but I couldn’t stop thinking about what Chiara said and what Clay told me.

I believe there is no price tag on that phone. Joshua genuinely wanted to have a way to keep in contact with me, and I understand why it's important for our relationship that he be able to reach me over the phone when I am working all the time.

But Chiara was right too. I have nothing to give him in return. I feel like such a mess with all my problems, insecurities, inexperience, and overwhelming workload.

I glance over at Joshua, and he smiles. "Thank you," I say, and he leans in, kissing my cheek.

He's perfect. The kindest person I've ever met—honest, funny, and incredibly attractive. *And what have I to offer?*

Chiara's words echo again in my mind. *I bet he's not even getting sex from you.* She's only sixteen, for fuck's sake, and she knows nothing. *But do I?*

Joshua is twenty-six, and in any adult relationship, sex is a part of it. I want to sleep with him, but I'm scared. I don't know what I'm doing, and I don't feel attractive enough. *What if I disappoint him? What if he doesn't like what he sees when I have my clothes off?*

Maybe I should start with something simpler, like giving him a blow job. But I don't even know how to do that. *Can you google how to give good head?*

"Where's your head at?" Joshua smiles at me, playing with my hair.

"Nowhere," I say, a little too fast.

"You okay?" He grins at me, his eyebrows raised.

"Sure," I say, putting a strand of my hair behind my ear, the motion letting the sleeve of my hoodie slip, revealing my forearm.

"What's that?" he asks, reaching out to touch the bandage.

I quickly put my arm on my lap, pulling down the sleeve. "Oh, nothing. I burned myself while cooking."

“Let me see, did you show a doctor?” Joshua asks, looking concerned.

“No, it’s not bad, really. I just have to keep putting cream on it and keep it covered for a few more days.” I shrug.

“You know, for someone claiming not to be clumsy, you’re hurting yourself a lot.” His mouth twists into a half-smile, but concern is evident in his eyes.

“Joshy, can you help me with this real quick?” Sophia shouts over from the register.

“Be right back,” Joshua says, pecking my lips.

I start to fidget, and Clay looks up from his plate. “What’s wrong, kitten?”

“Can you teach me how to give head?” I blurt out.

He nearly chokes on a broccoli. “What did you just say?”

“I mean, you know both perspectives, and Chiara thinks if I don’t have an expensive Christmas present for him or sex with him, he will leave me, but I didn’t even give him head yet, and I thought maybe that’s a place to start, but I mean if I suck at it, it’s just as bad so I don’t know,” I say, so fast it nearly becomes one word.

A smirk forms on Clay’s lips. “Kitten, did you just say you got sex advice from a sixteen-year-old?”

I look down at my lap. “I have no one else to talk to.”

“Didn’t we finally come to the conclusion that we’re best friends? Best friends talk about stuff like that,” he corrects.

“That’s why I asked,” I mutter.

“I’m thinking really hard about how I could teach you to give head without letting you suck my cock, but I come up blank. Seems like we should try it that way.”

“Clay!” I hiss.

“I just mean it would be the easiest and most enjoyable way for both of us.” He smirks.

“I hate you,” I say, crossing my arms over my chest.  
“Forget I asked.”

“Carolina—” Clay starts, but then Joshua and Sophia come back to our table.

“What did we miss?” Sophia asks, setting down her tray.

“We were just discussing some best friend bonding activities, right, kitten?” Clay says with a smile.

I glare at him, grabbing my water and taking a sip.

“Sounds fun,” Joshua chimes in. “Tell me when and where. I wanna join.”

I nearly spit all over him while Clay throws his head back, laughing.

## CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

---



### **Xander**

Saturdays are now a day I look forward to. Not only am I more productive, but I enjoy spending time with Carolina too.

“Nice phone,” I tell Carolina as I approach the register, my first client of the day leaving.

She’s so engrossed in whatever text she’s typing that it takes her a minute to reply. “Don’t even start,” she mutters, placing the phone on the counter.

Clay had already filled me in on the situation with Josh and Carolina’s reaction. “Josh can be such a fucking idiot sometimes.”

She gives me a knowing look and smiles. “Well, you’re the one saying it, not me.”

I chuckle lightly. “You can be an idiot too.”

“Hey,” she exclaims, shooting me a glare.

I step closer and lift her chin with my thumb and forefinger. “You deserve to be treated right and like a treasure. Let him spoil you and just say thank you.”

I watch as she gulps, and her eyes lock on my lips. I take a deep breath and let go, the door chiming before my next customer walks in.

*Shit, maybe spending more time with her is not the best idea, after all.*

---

Two hours later, I'm sitting at my desk in the shop, trying to pass the time during a half-hour break between customers by watching videos on my phone. I can't bear being out there with Carolina, making small talk or anything, while constantly fighting the thoughts of how much I want her—her beautiful face and curves.

It's driving me crazy.

And the worst part is, I genuinely like her. She's kind and funny, and I feel like she understands me in a way others don't. We come from the same darkness. I can't even explain it.

It's already teetering on the edge of obsession, and I can't allow myself to go there. It's complicated enough that Clay is so infatuated with her.

She's Josh's girlfriend, for fuck's sake. He's our closest friend, part of our family.

A knock on the door interrupts my thoughts, and Carolina peeks in.

"Come in," I holler, and she enters, standing before my desk.

"I'm sorry to bother you, but your next client just called and said he'll be fifteen minutes late," she says.

"Thanks," I say, looking back down at my phone.

"Okay, I'll let you know when he's here," she says, turning to leave. But as she does, her beautiful round ass accidentally knocks my sketchbook from the desk, and papers go flying everywhere.

"Fuck, I'm sorry," she apologizes, quickly kneeling to gather the scattered papers.

"It's okay," I reassure her, standing and rounding the desk. "I'll do it."

Carolina picks up one of the papers and looks at it. She freezes. And I watch as she looks up at me, holding a sketch of her eyes. It's capturing her golden-as-daylight almond-shaped eyes with a hint of tears, tears that are drawn in red, like blood.

Her face scrunches up, and she takes the next paper from the fallen stash. It's a sketch of her lips. She takes another, finding a pencil drawing of her face in profile, lost in thought.

"Xander..." she starts, clearly confused.

I quickly take the sketches from her hand and gently pull her to her feet. "Could you please sanitize the tattoo area again? I need to transfer some more stencils," I say.

"Sure," she says, frowning her forehead before leaving the office and closing the door behind her.

---

## **Carolina**

Xander was acting strangely today. Either he had a bad day, or he was intentionally ignoring me. He's not the most talkative person in general, but today, it felt like he didn't want me around, which made me feel uncomfortable. I tried my best to stay out of his way and give him space, although it hurt me a bit.

Finding those sketches didn't help either.

They're undeniably beautiful, but also made me question how he sees me. Do I really come across as weak and broken? It seemed like he captured my pain so clearly in those drawings, and it left me feeling exposed. I thought my mask was better. No wonder he doesn't enjoy spending time with me. I must be a nice little project for him to draw. It's not surprising, considering Xander's style tends to be dark and a little disturbed.

As the last customer of the day leaves, I notice a change in his mood. He no longer seems to be radiating fuck-off vibes, and I can't help but wonder what's going on with him.

“Could you grab a new box of gloves for me? They’re on the top right shelf,” Xander asks as he sanitizes the station.

Balancing on my tiptoes, I stretch to reach them, but I’m just too short. Warmth presses against me from behind. “Sorry, I didn’t consider that you’re vertically challenged,” Xander teases, amusement coloring his voice.

*Oh, now you’re talking to me again?*

“I can reach it. I just...” I trail off, reaching up again and stretching as much as possible when the sleeve of my hoodie slides to my elbow, taking the loosened bandage with it.

“What’s that?” Xander asks, seizing my wrist where I’m holding it up and turning me around. He tugs my wrist closer to scrutinize my arm, and I hastily pull my sleeve back down.

“Carolina, what the fuck?” he exclaims, anger seeping into his voice.

“It’s nothing,” I respond, trying to tug my arm back and avoiding his probing gray eyes.

“Did you do this to yourself?” he asks in a deep voice.

“What?” I ask, looking up at him in surprise.

*Perhaps I should tell him I did it myself.*

“Who did this to you?” He tries to lift my sleeve again, but I yank my arm with more force, and he releases his grip.

“It’s not a big deal. Forget about it. It’s getting late. I need to go,” I say, again dodging his gaze and attempting to sidestep him.

Xander pushes me gently against the shelf, sandwiching me with his body.

“Carolina...” He starts softly, tucking a strand of my hair behind my ear. “I can’t help you if you don’t talk to me.”

“I don’t need any help,” I bite out, but the slight tremble in my voice betrays me.

He steps back and lifts the hem of his shirt up to his chest, revealing his stomach. It’s a muscular stomach, the V-lines

leading to his crotch are well defined, and tattoos spread across the entirety of his skin, leaving no spot untouched.

All I see is a beautiful body covered in tattoos, so I whisper, "You're beautiful."

"Look closer," he simply directs.

I lean in closer, and beneath the tattoos, there are a multitude of scars. Xander takes my wrist, guiding my fingers to his stomach, allowing me to trace the scars. He exhales, and goose bumps trail the path of my touch.

"I recognize it because I've been there too," he says softly. "I knew it the moment I first saw you. Survivors recognize each other instinctively. The only difference is this," he continues, still holding my wrist, now pressing not just my fingers but my whole palm against his warm stomach. "It was a long time ago. I'm out now, safe and okay, as okay as I can be." I lift my gaze from his stomach to his eyes. "But you, you're still in the thick of it. And sometimes, when we're drowning, the only thing that can save us from going under is a helping hand from the outside."

He releases my hand, and I let it drop to my side. I can't bear his probing gaze any longer, so I look down at my feet again.

*Should I confide in him?*

It seems impossible. His boyfriend is a cop. Fuck, *my* boyfriend is a cop. He would tell Clay and Joshua, and they would intervene, possibly even getting Roberto locked up. *And then what?*

Until I finish college, there's no way I could get custody of Chiara. I could save up the money and try again once I've graduated and started my job at the NYPD, but there's no guarantee. I can't risk losing her just because I have to withstand my life for a little while longer.

So, I maneuver past him and the shelf, heading toward my backpack. "Thank you," I say, slipping on my jacket and making my way to the door.

As I walk away, the weight of his gaze is heavy on my back. I swing my backpack over my shoulder and reach for the doorknob. A part of me wants to turn back, to unload the burden that's been crushing me, but the risk is too high. Chiara is all that matters, and I can't afford to jeopardize her safety.

Once outside, the chill of the evening breeze sweeps over me. I pull the hood of my hoodie up, the echo of Xander's words ringing in my ears, the offer of help, the shared experience, the promise of safety.

It's tempting, *oh so tempting*.

But I can't, I remind myself. I have to endure to push through.

*For Chiara.*

Taking a deep breath, I make my way to the bar. Tomorrow is another day, another fight. But for now, I just need to keep moving.

Keep surviving.

Just like I always have.

## CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

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### **Carolina**

The bar is unusually slow for a Saturday night, and here I am, cleaning up the tables shortly after midnight.

Cindy comes up beside me and starts pestering me. “So, spill the beans about the cop you kissed last week! I’ve been waiting for you to tell me, but I’m getting impatient.” I sigh, showing no interest in sharing. “Come on, Carolina, don’t be so cold. I always talk to you about Donny. Is it time? Did you finally get yourself a boyfriend?”

I raise an eyebrow and ask, “How do you even know we kissed?”

She just shrugs. “Matteo mentioned something like that.”

“Something like that?” I stop cleaning and look at her.

“He said the cop tried to force himself on you, but we both know you would’ve punched him in the privates if he had.” I can’t help but chuckle. It’s getting harder and harder to keep up my bored mask every day when I am so fucking happy. Cindy teases further. “So, is he your boyfriend?”

I bite my lip, feeling like bragging a little. “Yes, he is.”

“Oh my God, Carolina,” Cindy exclaims, grabbing my arms and hopping with excitement. “I’m so happy for you! He’s such a hottie, like one of those K-pop singers. I bet he’s amazing in bed. Did you lose your V-card to him? You won’t find anyone better if you haven’t.”

I'm taken aback by her seemingly genuine happiness for me. Our friendship is more of a like-hate thing, mostly because I can't stand her most of the time, but I appreciate not having to be alone here in this dump of a place.

"Ladies, looks like it's an early night tonight," Donny announces, opening the kitchen door and winking at Cindy, who giggles.

*If anyone knows her way around sex, it's definitely her. Maybe she can help?*

I clear my throat. "No, I haven't lost my V-card to him, but I want to. I'm just unsure how and—"

Cindy interrupts. "We need to sit down for this." She grabs a bottle of tequila from the bar and pulls me to a table to sit.

Offering me the bottle, I decline, still feeling the last hangover. She takes a sip herself and says, "What do you need to know? I'm an open book."

"Well, I think I should start by giving him head, but..."

Cindy cuts me off immediately, "Nope, we're not going to do this, Carolina. Did he go down on you?"

"Not yet," I admit.

"He needs to be the first to give head, or else you'll end up just sucking his dick for years without getting anything in return," she says.

"I don't think Joshua would—"

Cindy interrupts again. "All men would. If you give him what he wants too easily, he won't put in the effort. So, make sure he goes down on you first before you do anything for him. Clear?"

I can't help but smirk. "Yes, ma'am. But you did say I should give him my V-card. Isn't that also giving him what he wants too easily?"

She laughs. "Fuck that! Losing your V-card is about you, not him. If you were sixteen, I'd say yes, it's too soon. But you're twenty-two, and if you want to get it over with, he's a

great candidate for it. Even if it's going to be bad, and trust me, it probably will be, you can look back at it and be proud for tapping that."

I laugh, and she smiles before taking another sip from the bottle.

"It will be bad?" I ask, feeling a bit vulnerable.

"Yeah, it might hurt for a bit, but if he cares for you beforehand, it won't last long. But let's be real, I've never heard any girl say their first time was good. You can only hope it won't be terrible."

"Wow, you're selling this, huh?" I say.

She smiles, "But the second time will be nice, the third time will be good, and after the fourth, you'll never want to stop again. To get there, you have to get it over with."

"And how do I start?" I ask, looking down at my hands in my lap.

"Girl, you go over there, get in bed with him, and take his dick in your hands. The rest will follow on its own."

"Really? Just like that?"

"Just like that. And if, by some miracle, he doesn't get the hint, just tell him, 'I want you. Please make me yours.' That shit drives men crazy," she says, and I raise an eyebrow. "You could also just say, 'Take me' or 'Fuck me,' but I don't think you're bold enough for that yet. But we'll get there," she adds with a wink.

I think about it for a minute, and she's right. I want to sleep with Joshua. I want to have this with him. I'm ready. Fuck it, I've been ready for years. I just waited for him.

I take the bottle of tequila from her hand, take a sip, and cough a little before saying, "Wish me luck." I stand and head to the locker to get my stuff.

"Get it, girl!" she yells enthusiastically after me.

## CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

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### **Carolina**

In front of Sophia’s and Joshua’s houses, I wait nervously before the door that leads to Joshua’s side. I look down at my phone, checking the message I just sent him.

Open the door for me?

I know I took a risk coming here after one in the morning, and there’s a chance he might already be asleep. But I had to try. If he doesn’t answer, I can always go back home.

Suddenly, the door opens, and Joshua appears with wide eyes. He’s already dressed in navy sleeping pants and a white T-shirt.

“Carolina, what are you—” He starts to say, but I grab his shirt collar, pulling him down for a kiss.

He catches on immediately and tugs me inside, closing the door behind us. Then he presses my back against it, cupping my head in his hands, and we kiss even deeper.

“Fuck, I missed you,” he whispers before diving back into kissing me.

I drop my backpack, and he helps slide my jacket off as I kick off my shoes, eager to get our clothes off.

“Upstairs?” I pant, not wanting to risk anyone finding us, and he takes my hand, leading me to his room.

As soon as we're inside, he closes the door. Not wanting to waste any time, I head straight to his bed and pull back the covers, getting under them and motioning for him to join me.

He rushes over and nearly trips over his feet before he climbs in, and as soon as he's close enough, I pull him in for another kiss. He groans against my lips, and my hand slips under his shirt, feeling his lean and muscular body—a swimmer's body, I realize. He's incredibly sexy, and I let my nails gently stroke down his back, causing him to break the kiss and groan again.

"I went to the bar, but it was already closed," he says, kissing down my neck. "I just got home. I'm fucking glad you're here. I needed to see you so bad," he confesses, his mouth moving to my ear and biting my lobe.

It sends a shiver down my spine, and my breath catches. "I needed to see you too. That's why I'm here," I whisper back.

He leans over me, his eyes filled with intensity. I lift his shirt, but he hesitates for a moment before shedding it, revealing his perfect naked chest. I let my fingers wander over his pecs and six-pack, feeling his muscles tense under my touch.

"Carolina," he breathes out my name like a prayer, closing his eyes.

The room is dim, but there's enough light from the window for me to see him, just enough to appreciate his beauty. I stroke his cheek, admiring his handsome face, before letting my hand move down to his sleep pants. His hard-on twitches when I rub over the material.

"Fuuuck." His breath is heavy as he presses his forehead against mine and clenches his teeth. Then, he gently takes my hand away from his crotch, bringing it to his lips to kiss my palm. "Let me take care of you first, or this will be over way too soon."

He takes hold of my wrists and brings them over my head, securing them with one hand. With his other hand, he glides down my arm, along the side of my chest, and down to my

hip. Meanwhile, his knee slides between my thighs, rubbing lightly against me.

The sensation sends a jolt of desire through my body, and I can't help but let out a soft moan.

He hushes me with a deep kiss while continuing to move his knee against me. Giving my hip a firm squeeze, he trails his hand back up my body, over my breast, squeezing it over my hoodie.

It's not enough. Wetness pools between my legs, my pussy clenching, needing more. "Joshua," I breathe out against his lips, needing to catch my breath.

He bites my bottom lip before easing back slightly, releasing my hands. I sit up, making him kneel back, and pull my hoodie over my head, leaving me in just my black bra.

"You're killing me," he says with a groan, leaning down to kiss my shoulder and collarbone.

Slowly, he pulls one bra strap down my shoulder, kissing my skin in its wake. Then he adds to the sensation by licking his way back up to my ear.

My body involuntarily shudders from the cool contrast of the air whispering over the path he left. I squeeze my legs around his thigh, trying to dull the building ache. My breath is coming in short pants, and it's all I can do not to take things into my own hands.

It's what I'm used to, after all.

"Is this okay?" Joshua asks, his hand gently squeezing my breast over the soft fabric of the bra.

Unclasping my bra, I lean back down, trying to stay covered as I pull it off and toss it on the floor. Next, I shimmy out of my jeans and lose my socks, leaving me with just my panties under the covers.

I wish I was bolder and more confident, but I'm not willing to risk the idea of him being disappointed with what he sees. Having his hands on me, feeling my imperfections, is

enough to make me want to run, but fuck, he feels so good. This feels so incredible, so surreal, that I don't want it to end.

Internally, I'm shaking with nerves, but I try to keep my voice steady as I reassure him, "More than okay."

"Carolina..." His breaths are heavy when he leans over me again, his hand gliding up my thigh, running his fingers over my skin while kissing me passionately.

His hand then moves up over my belly, finding my breast without any barrier between us. They are not cute perky tits, and I worry if he will like them, but the groan he lets out against my lips and the hardness I feel against my leg dismisses any fears.

He takes one of my nipples between his fingers, pinching it gently, and I arch my back, overwhelmed by the incredible sensation that makes me even wetter. "*Dio*," I murmur as his cinnamon scent fills my nose.

His hand finds my other nipple, rolling it between his fingers, making me gasp. "I'm going to learn your body inside and out, know every little thing that makes you sound like that," he promises.

His knee is back between my thighs, pressing against my pussy, and I notice how damp my panties have become.

My hand ventures down to his crotch again, this time slipping inside his pants. He's not wearing boxers underneath, allowing me to grab him directly. My touch causes him to hiss, and I grip him firmly like he showed me, pumping him a few times.

"I said you need to come first," he says, lifting my chin with his finger and forcing me to look into his eyes, my hand still working him.

*Didn't Cindy say he would get the hint?*

I'm lying here nearly naked with his cock in my hand, and he doesn't seem to be making any moves in the direction I want this to go. So, I pull out the big guns, hoping I don't embarrass myself.

“I want you. Please make me yours,” I whisper, my heart racing with nervousness.

He freezes for a moment, and my heart skips a beat, fearing I might have ruined the moment. But then he exhales. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying?” he asks, his voice filled with surprise.

“Fuck me, Joshua,” I whisper, thankful for the darkness in the room as I feel my cheeks flush with embarrassment.

“Fuck... I...” Joshua stammers, his hand cupping my cheek, trembling slightly. But his erection twitches in my grasp. “Are you sure? We can wait. We can just—” I grip his cock a bit harder and pump him again, effectively cutting off his protest. “Fuck,” he says again, his forehead falling to mine. Then he confesses, “I don’t think I have a condom here.”

“I’m on birth control,” I whisper.

“I’ve never slept with someone without a condom before,” he whispers back, and I release my grip on his cock, feeling uncertain.

*Am I the one pushing him to do something he’s not ready for?*

Maybe he doesn’t want me as much as I thought he did.

“We don’t have to do anything if you don’t want to,” I say, my voice tinged with a hint of hurt.

“If I don’t want to?” He chuckles. “Come here.”

---

## **Joshua**

*Fucking her perfect virgin pussy raw?*

*Never going to say no to that.*

I kiss those silly thoughts right out of her.

“I want to see you,” I say, reaching over to turn on the light on my nightstand. She blinks a few times, her eyes adjusting to

the sudden brightness, but then she smiles shyly at me.

“Or we could just stay in the dark,” she suggests, reaching out to turn off the lamp.

I chuckle softly. “Carolina, I need to see your pretty eyes when I make you mine,” I tell her, my voice rough as I turn the light back on. There is insecurity in her eyes, so I continue, “And your pretty face.” Kissing her forehead, I add, “Your pretty nose...” I kiss her nose gently. “And your sweet-as-fuck lips,” I say, capturing them in a deep kiss.

My hand wanders to the covers and slowly pulls them down. Breaking the kiss, I lean our foreheads together, then peer down at her full, beautiful breasts, her nipples hard. I have to close my eyes briefly, thanking the universe for bringing us here.

“You are so fucking beautiful,” I murmur, leaning in to suck on one nipple while rolling the other between my fingers.

“Joshua.” My name is a plea on her lips as she arches her back, pushing her breasts closer to my face.

I can’t help but grin in delight. But when I want to pull the covers further down, she grabs them and stops me. I look up at her, concerned. “What’s wrong? You can always change your mind. Just tell me.”

She shakes her head and takes a deep breath. “I didn’t change my mind. It’s just... I am not sexy.”

I resist the urge to laugh because I know she’s being vulnerable with me. Just because I’ve thought she was the sexiest thing I’ve ever laid eyes on since the day we met doesn’t mean she believes it herself.

“Carolina,” I say, cupping her cheek gently. “I wish you could see yourself through my eyes. All those little things you call flaws? They’re nothing but perfection to me. I love every inch of you.” With a reassuring smile, I pull on the covers again, and this time she lets me.

“I love this,” I say, kissing her collarbone tenderly. “I love these,” I say, kissing each of her upper arms one by one. “And

I fucking love these,” I say, squeezing her breasts together and licking over each mound and between, making her chuckle.

“I love this,” I say, planting kisses on her soft belly, and tears glisten in her eyes when I look up.

Determined to make her feel loved and wanted, I continue kissing my way down her body, every part of her. When I’m done, I find myself kneeling at the foot of the bed, holding her feet in my hand and kissing her toe, which elicits a giggle from her, a sound that is as rare as it is precious.

I then trail kisses up her leg, along the inside, this time moving closer to my goal between her thighs. Her gaze is hazy with desire as our eyes meet. I pause for a moment, my fingers hooked in the waistband of her panties.

“May I?” I ask, and she slowly nods.

With a gentle touch, I help her out of them, leaving her completely bare before me. She is already wet for me, glistening, making my mouth water.

I need to taste her, to make her come on my tongue and give her what she deserves.

I swipe my hands up her inner thighs, nudging them apart.

“What are you doing?” she asks me, trying to close her legs again, so I let her.

“I want to taste you, Carolina, make sure you’re ready for me,” I say, stroking her calves.

“I’ve never done that before,” she admits, blushing.

“You have no idea how hard it makes me to know that I have the honor to get all of your firsts,” I say, hovering over her and kissing her. “But I can wait if you’re not ready,”

“No, I want everything with you, I just have... insecurities, I guess,”

“That’s okay.” I kiss her once more before scooting back down, and she opens her legs for me, so I push them wider. “I am going to make you forget all about them,” I promise before leaning down, breathing in her scent. I lick over her slit, and

she gasps. Then I use my fingers to spread her open for me and lick her clit, her taste driving me mad. “Fuck, Carolina, you taste better than candy,” I say, which makes her giggle again, but it turns quickly into moans when I delve back in.

My hand wanders up her thigh, and her mouth falls open on a pant, eyes shut. I slide one of my fingers inside her just a little before pulling it out again, repeating the motion and feeling her stretch around me. Her hips start to move with me, and each time, I push my finger a little farther, trying to prepare her.

I know no matter what I do, it is still going to hurt, but I want to lessen the pain as much as possible.

As I’m sliding my finger out once more, her tight pussy clenches, telling me she’s close to coming, so I gently ease another finger in. She whimpers, her thighs trembling, and I groan with how responsive she is for me.

I imagine it’s my cock she’s squeezing and not my fingers, moaning with her in anticipation. To take her raw, feeling her virgin pussy contract around me has my own legs shaking.

Her breathing increases with each thrust of my fingers, and she grinds down against my hand. Then, with one of her hands on my head, she runs her fingers through my hair, pulling on it, tugging me closer. I release a growl into her pussy, her taste and the slight pain on my scalp nearly enough for me to come with her when she falls over the edge.

---

## **Carolina**

Joshua wipes his face on my inner thigh, then leans over me, kissing me deeply so I can taste myself on his tongue. Surprisingly, it’s not a bad taste, and I feel relieved.

This was mind-blowing, but it would have been tainted if I tasted bad.

*No wonder everyone talks about getting head.*

He leans back, smiling at me, and I reach up to wipe his hair away from his beautiful eyes, my finger finding his dimple.

“You still want this?” he asks, his voice filled with tenderness.

“Yes,” I reply, panting and feeling a mixture of excitement and nervousness.

He’s already laying between my legs, cradling my head with his hands, his heart pounding almost out of his chest.

“Okay, I don’t want to hurt you, but I don’t think I can prevent that,” he admits, and I can see he’s worried.

“I know,” I say, smiling at him reassuringly.

I let my hand wander to his pants and help him slide them down before he removes them completely. His erection presses against my pussy, sending shivers through me.

I wonder how much it’s going to hurt, but it doesn’t matter. I know I can handle a lot.

He kisses me again before lifting my thighs to his hips. “Wrap them around me,” he whispers.

I do as he says and reach up, holding onto his shoulders. He positions himself at my entrance, and my heart races. His hands are on my hips, and he leans down, bringing his face close to mine until our noses touch. He pecks my lips before whispering, “I love you.”

In one motion, he jerks my hips to him while thrusting into me, and I gasp as a sharp pain shoots through me. He peppers my face with kisses, murmuring how sorry he is and how perfect I am, all the while stroking my hips gently without moving inside me. I grip his shoulders hard, my nails digging into his skin.

After the initial short, stabbing pain, there’s a burning sensation between my legs, but it’s not as intense as I expected. It’s more of a foreign feeling, realizing I’m being filled by him. I relax a bit, and he glides in deeper, making me gasp again as the burning sensation intensifies.

“I’m so sorry. Are you okay?” Joshua asks, his voice strained and panting, his hands now holding my head gently.

“Are *you* okay?” I ask right back.

*Does it hurt for a man to take someone’s virginity?*

I’m clenching my pussy, testing if it lessens the burning sensation, but Joshua nearly whimpers with the move. His fingers tremble beside my temple. “Am I doing it wrong?” I ask, tears welling up in my eyes.

“What? Fuck no, you’re perfect,” he reassures me, kissing me tenderly. “I’m going to move, okay? Tell me if it hurts too much.”

I nod, and he starts moving his hips slowly. The motion lessens the burning sensation, and I take a deep breath.

“Better?” he asks, stroking my cheek gently while pulling out and pushing back in slowly.

“Yes,” I say, genuinely feeling better now.

He kisses my temple sweetly. “You feel so fucking good,” he whispers, his voice rough. “So tight, warm, and wet. So soft.”

“You like it?” I ask, genuinely surprised since he seemed in pain earlier.

He makes a deep grunting sound as he thrusts in slowly again. “Like it? I fucking love it. Now I just have to make you love it too,” he says, then gets off me, leaving me feeling empty.

“What are you doing?” I ask, confused, as he positions himself behind me, pulling me close and spooning me. He wraps his arm under my head, grabbing one of my breasts, while his other hand lifts my thigh and pulls it back over his hips. He nuzzles my neck and slowly enters me from behind. This time, it feels good, making me moan, the burning sensation only slightly there.

His hand strokes my thigh with his slow thrusts before moving to my front, finding my clit. He circles it while rolling

my nipple with his other hand, steadily increasing his movement.

I'm panting, feeling much more relaxed as he plants open-mouthed kisses up my neck. "You're doing perfect. You take me so good, Carolina," he whispers, and his words cause my belly to flutter, making me forget about the slight pain still there.

His kisses, the way he squeezes my nipple, and his finger on my clit all coax me toward an orgasm, something I hadn't thought possible while still slightly hurting with him deep inside me. The pleasure builds, and with each movement of his body and touch of his hand, I'm pushed closer to the edge.

"Come for me, my Carolina. I need you to come on my cock," he murmurs against my skin, his thrusts becoming shallower but still relentless.

He bites down on my shoulder, and I gasp, a wave of pleasure washing over me. "Joshua," I moan out, clenching down on him.

He groans, pausing inside me. "So fucking tight, Carolina," he grits out, panting, and I can't help but squeeze around him again as a new level of ecstasy washes over me.

He moans, his hips bucking before he presses into me one last time. I'm so full I don't know if I need more or if it's too much. A warmth fills me, and I realize he's holding his breath, his orgasm taking over. He pulls me even closer to him and hugs me tightly to his chest, showering the back of my head with kisses as we both catch our breaths.

My hands grip his forearms around me, and he loosens his embrace, gently pulling out of me. Joshua then turns me to face him, leaning down to kiss me tenderly.

More wetness than I think there should be pools between us, and I break the kiss, giving him a panicked look. "I think I just made a mess."

"I've got you," he reassures me, kissing my forehead before heading to his en suite bathroom.

I hear the water running before he returns with a warm, wet washcloth to clean me up. Glancing down, I notice I've bled on his sheets. It's not much, but enough to leave a stain on the sky-blue covers. My face flushes with embarrassment, but Joshua doesn't seem to mind.

"I am so sorry," I whisper.

"Hush..." He gently silences me, pulling me close to his side again and squeezing me affectionately. "Are you feeling okay?" he asks with his lips against my temple.

I nod. "Was it any good for you?" I ask, my insecurities rising to the top.

He huffs, and the force of air swirls strands of hair around my face. "This was the best fucking thing, I promise. You're absolutely perfect for me," he says, kissing my head.

## CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

---



### **Carolina**

“Hey, sleepyhead,” Joshua whispers in my ear, but I don’t want to open my eyes just yet.

Everything feels warm, cozy, and...

... safe?

*Is that what this is?*

Joshua kisses down the side of my face, holding me close. “You can sleep a little longer, but I wanted to make us breakfast. Eggs and bacon or toast?”

“No, stay here.” I pout, snuggling back into him.

“How do you feel? Are you sore?” he asks, his tone gentle.

I check myself and admit, “A bit, but it’s not bad. I’m okay.” I turn in his arms and blink up at him.

“There are those beautiful eyes,” he says, smiling down at me and lifting a hand to stroke my cheek. “Thank you for this. For trusting me with you. I swear I’ll do anything to never make you regret that choice,” he says, leaning down to put a lingering kiss on my forehead.

*I love this man.* His kindness, his fun side, his gentleness. All of him.

“You said you love me,” I whisper.

“I am so madly in love with you it isn’t even funny anymore.” He chuckles, leaning back a bit to look down at me.

“I love you too, Joshua,” I whisper back.

He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath before opening them again and smiling at me. “I don’t deserve you, but I’m going to keep you anyway,” he whispers.

*If anything, it’s the other way around.*

---

After we cuddled for a while, Joshua went to make us breakfast, and my stomach won’t stop tingling.

I take a quick shower and pull my hair into a ponytail, then slip into the same clothes as yesterday. Making my way downstairs, I feel a slight ache, but it only brings a smile to my lips. We’ve done it, and it wasn’t terrible, not even bad. I can’t wait for it to feel fantastic.

Music is coming from the floor beneath, and my curiosity takes over. There’s no one in sight, so I quickly make my way down the last set of stairs, halting on the last step finding myself in a basement turned into a gym. The music is super loud, a remix of ABBA’s “Gimme! Gimme! Gimme!” playing, so Clay doesn’t notice me as he’s jumping rope.

He’s wearing gray sweat shorts, a red cap on backward, and white sneakers—nothing else. His chest glistens with sweat, and his calves and arms are tattooed, though his chest is bare. I can’t help but watch in awe as his muscular pecs wiggle with every jump.

He had shown me videos of other people doing it, and I found it somewhat amusing that someone like him would have such a hobby. But damn, seeing him in action now it’s really fucking cool.

The rope is swinging so fast while he skips his feet, crosses his legs, and even turns around himself effortlessly. He lets go of the rope with one hand, allowing it to hurl around before catching it again out of thin air. Then he swings it beside him like a pro. It’s truly fucking impressive, and he’s mesmerizing to watch.

An arm wraps around my shoulder, pulling me back against a hard stomach. I see tattooed fingers when I look down, so I relax against Xander, who bends down to whisper in my ear. “I know I make fun of him most of the time, but our boy is fucking sexy when he does this, don’t you think?”

I nod absentmindedly, my eyes still fixed on a bead of sweat running down Clay’s chest before I even register what Xander just said.

“I am going to lick that fine chest. Let me know if you want to join.” There’s an obvious smirk in his voice, but I’m too mesmerized to think more of it.

He lets go of me when the song stops and walks over to Clay, who is panting hard, before grabbing his neck and licking from his collarbone to his ear.

A tingling between my thighs starts when I see Clay let his head fall to the side with his eyes closed on a groan before I quickly make my way upstairs.

“Hey, your timing is perfect.” Joshua smiles at me as he places two plates on the kitchen island. He’s wearing dark gray sweatpants and a matching hoodie, looking swoon-worthy.

I smile back and climb up to sit on the high barstool, inhaling the delicious-smelling plate of eggs and bacon. I can’t remember the last time someone made me breakfast.

“Thank you,” I say. “I haven’t even asked. Did you sleep all right?”

He sits beside me, his left hand going to my knee and strokes it with his thumb. “Never slept better,” he says, his eyes briefly lingering on my lips as he leans in, kissing me.

“God, that smells good. Is there something left for us?” Clay asks as he and Xander walk into the kitchen. “Oh, hey, kitten, early morning visit?”

“She stayed the night,” Joshua says casually, kissing my temple before getting back to eat his eggs.

I blush hard.

*Did he have to say it like that?*

“Oh, really?” Clay grins at me, taking a bottle of water from the refrigerator.

When he turns again to close it, I can’t help but notice another droplet of sweat running down his back. I quickly shake my head and look down at my plate.

“There are some eggs and bacon for you in the pan, and Sophia should be here in a minute with some bagels, coffee, and tea,” Joshua explains just as the front door opens.

“Hello, hello,” Sophia singsongs as she enters the kitchen, setting down a cup holder with to-go cups and two white bags.

She places a mug in front of Joshua, saying, “Black tea…” then takes out the next one in front of herself, “… green tea,” and gestures to the three mugs on the counter, “… and coffee, black.”

“How do you drink your coffee?” Joshua asks, but Clay has already taken out a mug and opens the lid, filling it with just the right amount of sugar before stirring it and handing it to me.

Joshua shoots him a furrowed look, but I whisper a quick “Thank you.”

“So, it’s already after lunchtime. What are our plans for today?” Sophia asks, pulling out a bagel and taking a bite.

I eat a forkful of eggs and close my eyes, savoring the delicious taste. “Good?” Joshua whispers, smiling down at me.

“So good,” I smile back.

“Since it’s snowing outside, we could watch that new Christmas movie,” Clay suggests.

“That looked so cringy,” Sophia pouts.

“That’s the whole point. Christmas movies need to be cringy, right, kitten?” Clay asks, and I just shrug.

“Are you joining us?” Sophia asks me.

“Sure, I just need to head home in a couple of hours to change before my shift,” I say.

“I hate that you have to work on Sundays, even if it’s just in the evening,” Joshua says.

“Why don’t we all go and hang out at the bar tonight?” Clay suggests.

Xander looks at me, “Would that get you in trouble?”

I shrug. “Not if you drink something and don’t show up in your cop uniforms.”

Xander huffs a laugh.

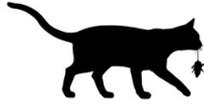
“If it’s slow, I can hang out for a bit, but if not, I can’t really talk to you,” I add.

“That’s okay. We haven’t been in a bar for a while now, and I think it would be fun seeing you work,” Joshua says.

“Okay,” I say, taking a bite of bacon.

## CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

---



### **Carolina**

*It all feels so unreal.*

As I head back to Harlem, there is a smile on my face the whole way. Hanging out with them, cuddling with Joshua on the big couch while we all watched that cringy movie, it was like I belonged somewhere for the first time in what feels like forever.

Joshua said he loves me, and I think I found real friends in Xander, Clay, and Sophia. The weight on my shoulders has lightened a bit. I think if the rest of my life turns out this livable, I might endure the next two years and come out of it whole.

As I enter our apartment complex, I'm climbing the stairs when I suddenly hear Roberto shouting.

“Where do you think you're going, girl? Give me back my money, you thieving whore!”

Without thinking, I run up the stairs faster than I thought I could. When I reach the third floor where our apartment is, Roberto is holding Chiara tightly by her wrist. He backhands her with his other hand, making her fall to the floor.

I rush to Chiara's side, placing myself between her and Roberto. Then, I gently hold her face to check if she's okay.

This is the first time he has ever touched her.

*Is it because I wasn't here?*

Guilt settles in as I search Chiara's face, tears streaming down her cheeks. Her right cheek is red, but it doesn't look like he broke her skin.

"Are you okay, *piccola?*" I whisper to her, and she nods in response. "Go to Monica's," I tell her, but she shakes her head.

Just as I stand and reach a hand out to help her get up, Roberto forcefully slams me against the wall, his hand gripping my throat.

"Lina," Chiara cries out.

I manage to wheeze out, "Go!"

She runs down the stairs, and I'm left facing a furious Roberto.

He shouts at me, his spit landing on my face, "Your sister, that little bitch, stole my money!"

I want to respond, but the pressure on my throat leaves me unable to speak or breathe. Roberto seems to realize it too, and takes a step back, releasing his grip on me.

Clutching my throat, I manage to croak, "I'll get you more money," as I slowly retreat toward the stairs.

"Where the hell do you think you're going? I want my money now!" he shouts, following me.

The problem is I don't have any money on me, and the situation is about to escalate. In a panic, I turn and sprint down the stairs. But I find myself much slower than Roberto with his longer legs. On the second floor, he catches up and grabs hold of my jacket, halting me in my steps.

"You worthless pig, just as useless as your father!" he spits out.

Before I can process what he just said, he shoves me down the stairs. I tumble, and a sharp pain shoots through my body so I cry out with each impact. Each step feels like a brutal hit, shaking me to the core. I desperately try to steady myself, reaching out for something to stop my fall, but it's no use. I barely hear Roberto's laughter before I feel a heavy thud as my head smacks against a step, and everything goes black.

---

## Joshua

Sophia huffs next to me. “I thought girls are the ones who take a long time to get ready.”

I chuckle. “You know Clay, he’s quite vain.”

I hear Xander snicker, and when I turn around, I see Clay frowning with his arms crossed. “Excuse me? What did you say?” he asks, sounding offended.

I grin. “Oh, come on, we all know it takes you hours to style your hair like that.”

“Not everyone can pull off the I-don’t-give-a-fuck-how-I-look look as well as you do,” he counters.

In response, I stick my middle finger up at him.

“Cut it, boys, or we’ll be late. I don’t want her to think we stood her up,” Sophia warns, and we grab our shoes and jackets to head out.

I can’t stop thinking about last night. I feel like a lovesick teenager. The moment I held her in my arms after what we shared, I realized the years I spent waiting for her were worth it.

I push my way to the front door, and Clay chuckles teasingly. “Someone’s eager.”

I grin as I open the door, ready to step out. But as I turn, I’m surprised to see Chiara standing on our doorstep, her hand raised as if about to knock. Her face is flushed and stained with tears.

“Chiara? What’s wrong?” I ask.

Xander speaks up at the same time, asking, “How did you get here?”

Chiara just lowers her hand and breaks into sobs. Clay pushes past me, gently placing his hands on her shoulders and

bending down to look into her eyes. “What happened, Chiara? Where is Carolina?” he asks, his voice filled with worry.

“She’s in the hospital.”

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This book is a work of fiction, but some situations discussed are of a sensitive nature and include the mention of knives and guns. Please visit my [website](#) for a more detailed list of trigger warnings.

If you or anyone you know is in emotional distress or has been a victim of physical or psychological abuse, homophobic actions, fatphobic actions, binge eating, or bullying in general, please seek help or assist them to obtain help. Reporting the crime could possibly prevent another incident.

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If you live in:

USA call RAINN - 1-800-656-HOPE

Canada call 1.888.407.4747 for help

UK call The Samaritans 116 123

Australia call Lifeline Australia 13 11 14

# PLAYLIST

- “You Found Me” by The Fray
- “When the party’s over” by Billie Eilish
- “Pray” by Jessie Murph
- “Numb” by Linkin Park
- “Savin’ Me” by Nickelback
- “The Kill (Bury Me)” by Thirty Seconds to Mars
- “Sex & Candy” by Macy Playground
- “ZITTI E BUONI” by Måneskin
- “IDK You Yet” by Alexander 23
- “Keeping Me Alive” by Jonathan Roy
- “CORALINE” by Måneskin
- “What It’s Like” by Everlast
- “Therefore I Am” by Billie Eilish
- “Keep Your Head up Princess” by Anson Seabra
- “Fragile” by Kygo & Labrinth
- “Soldi” by Mahmood
- “Lovely” by Billie Eilish & Kahlid
- “Tattoo” by Loreen
- “Save Me” by Shinedown
- “MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT” by Loveless

“Cruel To Be Kind” by Letters to Cleo  
“Sweater Weather” by The Neighbourhood  
“Way Down We Go” by KALEO  
“Rescue” by Lauren Daigle  
“I’m Tired” by Labrinth & Zendaya  
“Over the Rainbow” by Israel Kamakawiwo’ole  
“Sky is the Limit” by Mark Ambor  
“Iris” by The Goo Goo Dolls  
“Break For You” by Valley  
“Brividi” by Mahmood & BLANCO  
“Let’s Go Home Together” by Ella Henderson & Tom Grennan  
“Your Winter” by Sister Hazel  
“Here (Acoustic)” by Tom Grennan  
“Daylight” by David Kushner  
“I GUESS I’M IN LOVE” by Clinton Kane  
“Rossetto” by Random  
“In Your Arms” by Jang Yun Joo  
“Gimme Gimme (Club Mix) (feat. Bleech)” by Lee Cabrera & Kevin McKay  
“Dandelions (slowed + reverb)” by Ruth B.  
“In the End” by Linkin Park  
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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Blake Black is a Reverse Harem Author with a passion for the hurt/comfort trope and sugary-sweet romance. When she is not crafting her next spicy scene, Blake loves to drive her convertible and soak in the beauty of nature. Powered by her favorite energy drinks, she often writes deep into the night, creating stories filled with trauma, healing and love that illuminates even the darkest corners.



**BLAKE BLACK**  
*Last in the Darkness, Dawn to the Light*

